Reading Focus

- What were the experiences of immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s?
- What different challenges did immigrants from Europe, Asia, and Mexico face?

Main Idea

Millions of immigrants, representing many different cultures, arrived in the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Key Terms

pogrom
steerage
quarantine
ghetto
restrictive covenant
Chinese Exclusion Act
Gentlemen's Agreement
alien

Target Reading Skill

Recognize Multiple Causes

As you read, complete this chart listing the reasons why immigrants came to America and their experiences in their new land.

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<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>Reasons for Immigration</th>
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<td>Europe</td>
<td>To escape religious persecution</td>
<td>Settled in cities in the East and the Midwest</td>
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Setting the Scene

Peter Mossini was born in 1898 into a poor family in Sicily. He shared a small two-bedroom house with his parents and seven brothers and sisters. Peter's parents could not afford to send him to school, so at age ten he went to work in a factory. He earned about ten cents a day for eleven or twelve hours of work.

When Peter was still an infant, his father left home to find work in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. Peter's family survived on the money his father sent back in addition to the children's wages from the factory. Peter's father returned to Sicily in 1913, and the family once again struggled to get by. Following World War I, Peter saw no future for himself in his hometown of Santa Teresa di Riva:

"During the First World War, I was in the army, and I held to my idea about coming to America. Then, in 1919, my sister Josephine came [to America]. I was very close to her... She came by herself and she got married. She was doing very well over here. And I wanted to build a new life, better myself. Eventually, all my brothers and sisters came to the United States."

—Peter Mossini

At age 22, Peter boarded a ship, the Pesaro, bound for America. Three months later he joined his sister in Portage, Pennsylvania.

It was sometimes said that America's streets were paved with gold. This myth held a grain of truth for the millions of immigrants who left a life of poverty behind. Like Peter, they came to America because it offered, if not instant wealth, then at least the chance to improve their lives. Some immigrants did get rich through hard work and determination. Many more managed to carve out a decent life for themselves and their families. For these immigrants, the chance to come to the United States was indeed a golden opportunity.
The Immigrant Experience

In the late 1800s, people in many parts of the world were on the move from farms to cities and from one country to another. Immigrants from around the globe were fleeing crop failures, shortages of land and jobs, rising taxes, and famine. Some were also escaping religious or political persecution.

Immigrants' Hopes and Dreams

The United States received a huge portion of this global migration. In 1860, the resident population of the United States was 31.5 million people. Between 1865 and 1920, close to 30 million additional people entered the country.

Some of these newcomers dreamed of getting rich, or at least of securing free government land through the Homestead Act. Others yearned for personal freedoms. In America, they had heard, everyone could go to school, young men were not forced to serve long years in the army, and citizens could freely take part in a democratic government. Conditions in two countries, Italy and Russia, illustrate how economic problems and political persecution encouraged millions to immigrate to the United States.

"There were two classes of people in Sicily," Peter Mossini said, "the rich and the very poor." A few people owned most of the land and the poor lived as sharecroppers. In the late 1800s, the economy of southern Italy slipped into decline. The land was very poor, but the government of Italy demanded more and more money in taxes. Thousands of farmers lost their livelihood when a parasite killed many of the region's grapevines. Many tenant farmers found they simply could not afford to stay in their homes and still take care of their families. Skilled workers, too, could not find jobs. The United States offered a solution.

In Russia, Jews faced hostility from their Christian neighbors and the government. In the 1880s, a wave of pogroms, or violent massacres of Jews, swept across the country. The czar responded to the pogroms by sharply limiting where Jews could live and how they could earn a living. America offered freedom of religion and the opportunity to build a new life.

Crossing the Ocean

In the late 1800s, steam-powered ships could cross the Atlantic Ocean in two to three weeks. By 1900, on more powerful steamships, the crossing took just one week. Even this brief journey, however, could be difficult, especially for those who could not afford cabins. Most immigrants traveled in steerage, a large open area beneath the ship's deck. Steerage offered limited toilet facilities, no privacy, and poor food, but tickets were relatively cheap.

Crossing the vast Pacific Ocean took much longer, but the arrangements were similar. Passengers traveled in steerage, with few comforts. A person's country of origin, however, could make a difference in the conditions aboard a ship. Immigrants from Japan, whose power in the world was growing, often received better treatment than those from China, which at that time was a weak country.

VIEWING HISTORY

While crossing the Atlantic, some passengers escaped crowded conditions in steerage by sleeping on deck in the open air. Making Inferences Why did shipowners provide such poor conditions for immigrants in steerage?

In the late 1800s, millions of immigrants brought their belongings and their dreams to the United States in a single steamer trunk.

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Arriving in America  Information about the number and origins of the nation's immigrants is not precise. Officials often misidentified the origins of immigrants. About one third of them were “birds of passage.” These were usually young, single men who worked for a number of months or years and then returned home.

Historians estimate that about 10 million immigrants arrived between 1865 and 1890. Most came from northwestern and central European countries: about 2.8 million from Germany, another 1.8 million from Great Britain, and nearly 1.4 million from Ireland.

In the 1890s, the pattern of immigration shifted dramatically. Most new immigrants came from the countries of central, southern, and eastern Europe and the Middle East. Between 1890 and 1920 about 3.8 million Italians, Greeks, Slavs, Jews, and Armenians arrived. Around 3 million immigrants came from Italy alone. Another 3 million, primarily Jews, came from Russia.

Until the 1880s, decisions about whom to allow into the country were left to the states. In 1882, the federal government began excluding certain categories of immigrants. In 1891, the Office of the Superintendent of Immigration was formed to determine who was fit to settle in America and who was not.

Immigrants entered the United States through several port cities. European newcomers might come through Boston, Philadelphia, or Baltimore. Asians might enter through San Francisco or Seattle. Yet more than 70 percent of all immigrants came through New York City, which was called the “Golden Door.”

Immigrants From Europe
Throughout most of the 1800s, immigrants arriving in New York entered at the Castle Garden depot, near the southern tip of Manhattan. In 1892, the federal government opened a huge reception center for steerage passengers on Ellis Island in New York harbor, near where the Statue of Liberty had been erected in 1886. The statue, a gift from France, celebrated “Liberty Enlightening the World.” It became a symbol of the United States as a place of refuge and hope.

Physical Exams  In 1892, the federal government required all new immigrants to undergo a physical examination. Those who were found to have a contagious disease such as tuberculosis faced quarantine, a time of isolation to prevent the spread of a disease. They could even be deported. People with trachoma, an eye disease common among immigrants, were automatically sent back to their country.

Fiorello La Guardia, who later became mayor of New York City, worked as an interpreter at Ellis Island. “It was harrowing to see families separated,” he remembered in the book The Making of an Insurgent:

**Focus on Citizenship**

**Naturalization** The process of becoming a United States citizen is called naturalization. A male immigrant seeking citizenship needed to meet several requirements, including “good moral character,” “attachment to the Constitution,” and (after 1906) proficiency in the English language. Only “free white persons” and people of African descent could apply.

A woman won citizenship by marrying a citizen or accompanying a husband through his naturalization. Her name did not appear on the naturalization certificate, but she could prove her citizenship with her husband’s papers and their marriage certificate. Single women and widows could apply as individuals. Since female citizens did not enjoy the same rights as male citizens, many chose not to spend the money to become a citizen.

**Interpreting Graphs**
Beginning in the 1890s, large numbers of immigrants arrived from eastern and southern Europe.

**Analyzing Information** Which region provided the greatest number of immigrants in 1910?
Sometimes, if it was a young child who suffered from trachoma, one of the parents had to return to the native country with the rejected member of the family. When they learned their fate, they were stunned. They . . . had no homes to return to.”

—Fiorello La Guardia

After their physicals, immigrants showed their documents to officials and then collected their baggage. If they had the address of friends or relatives, they headed off to find them. Those who were on their own had a harder time. Criminals hung around ports with fake offers of lodgings and jobs, stealing money and baggage from the unwary.

Where Immigrants Settled Immigrants often sought to live in communities established by previous settlers from their homelands. These communities formed not only in ports of entry, such as New York and Boston, but also in inland cities. In this way, large settlements of Poles and Italians grew in Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and Milwaukee. A diverse group of immigrants found a home in Chicago, a growing port, railroad hub, and industrial center. Some immigrants continued on to mining towns of the West. Only 2 percent went to the South, an area that offered newcomers few jobs.

Once settled, immigrants looked for work. When jobs were scarce, employers (many of whom were immigrants themselves) took advantage of the newcomers. They paid them less than other workers and paid the women even less than the men. Female seamstresses, for example, did the same job as male tailors, working up to 14 hours a day, 6 days a week, but earning only half as much as the men.

Ghettos Some urban neighborhoods became ghettos, areas in which one ethnic or racial group dominated. Many newly arrived immigrants chose to live near others of their ethnic group because of the comfort of familiar language and traditions. These ethnic communities strongly reflected the culture of the homeland. In 1904, Emily Dinwiddie, a tenement-house inspector, wrote a joyful description of Philadelphia’s “Little Italy”:

Comparing Primary Sources

Cultural Ties

Many people held opinions on how immigrants could best adjust to their new lives in the United States. Some thought they should give up their own language and customs as quickly as possible. Others thought they should hold on to their heritage.

Analyzing Viewpoints Compare the statements of the two speakers.

Breaking Cultural Ties

“We wanted to be Americans so quickly that we were embarrassed if our parents couldn’t speak English. My father was reading a Polish paper. And somebody was supposed to come to the house. I remember sticking it under something. We were that ashamed of being foreign.”

—Louise Nagy, a Polish immigrant, 1913

Preserving Cultural Ties

“We ate the same dishes, spoke the same language, told the same stories, [as in Syria], . . . To me the colony [neighborhood] was a habitat so much like the one I had left behind in Syria that its home atmosphere enabled me to maintain a firm hold on life in the face of the many difficulties which confronted me in those days.”

—Abraham Ribahny, on his neighborhood in New York, 1893
The black-eyed children rolling and tumbling together, the gaily colored dresses of the women and the crowds of street vendors all give the neighborhood a wholly foreign appearance."

—Emily Dinwiddie

Dinwiddie’s delight with the neighborhood did not lessen her distress at the slum conditions and poverty that she saw.

Other ghettos formed when ethnic groups isolated themselves, in part because of threats from whites. San Francisco’s Chinatown had well-known street boundaries: “From Kearny to Powell, and from California to Broadway,” recalled one resident. “If you ever passed them and went out there, the white kids would throw stones at you.”

Still other urban ghettos resulted from restrictive covenants. Restrictive covenants were agreements among homeowners not to sell real estate to certain groups of people. These covenants often prevented African Americans, Mexicans, Asian Americans, and Jews from buying land or houses in the better neighborhoods.

**Immigrants From Asia**

Most of the immigrants who entered the United States through West Coast ports came from Asia. Chinese and Japanese formed the largest groups by far. Culturally, Asian immigrants differed greatly from both Americans and European immigrants, and those differences made them targets of suspicion and even hostility. As a result, Asian immigrants often found that the path to acceptance was especially difficult.

**Chinese Excluded** In the mid-1800s, American railroad companies recruited about a quarter of a million Chinese workers. Thousands helped build the transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869.

Chinese immigrants had to work for their companies until they had paid the cost of their passage and upkeep. Many Chinese immigrants paid their debts, settled down, and began to work in other fields, often side by side with white Americans and European immigrants. Those occupations included mining, farming, fishing, factory work, food preparation, and laundering.

Like many European immigrants, the Chinese tended to live in their own ethnic communities. This was not only more comfortable for Chinese Americans, but it also helped them avoid conflicts with non-Asian neighbors.

American labor unions fought hard to exclude Chinese immigrants. Because the Chinese accepted low wages, they affected the rates of pay of all workers. The unions maintained that if Chinese laborers kept coming to California, wage rates there would continue to drop.

Other groups claimed the Chinese simply were not worthy of being Americans. Using scientific-sounding but faulty reasoning, anti-Asian movements
READING CHECK
Why did many Chinese immigrants face hostility in the United States?

claimed that Asians were physically and mentally inferior to white Americans. These claims helped spread racist attitudes toward Asian immigrants.

Congress responded to the demands of unions and others by passing the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The act prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the country. It did not, however, prevent entry by those who had previously established residence in the United States. The act was renewed in 1892 and 1902 and then made permanent. It was not repealed until 1943. The number of residents of Chinese ancestry fell considerably from 1890 to 1940.

In 1910, the federal government built an immigration center on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, similar to the center on Ellis Island in New York harbor. There immigrants underwent a lengthy examination. Besides having to pass medical checks, the Chinese newcomers also had to prove that they should not be excluded.

JapaneseRestricted Many of the earliest Japanese to immigrate to the United States came from Hawaii. They had migrated to Hawaii to work on sugar plantations, and when the United States annexed Hawaii in 1898, a number of Japanese saw an opportunity for a better life in America.

By 1920 some 200,000 Japanese immigrants had arrived in the United States through West Coast ports. Most Japanese settled in the Los Angeles area, and soon they were producing a large percentage of southern California’s fruits and vegetables. Mainly involved in private business, the Japanese did not compete with union laborers as the Chinese had. Still, labor unions and the political leaders who supported them fought to stop Japanese immigration.

More than economic motives were at work, for some acts reflected prejudice against Asians generally. In 1906, for example, the school board in San Francisco ruled that all Chinese, Japanese, and Korean children should attend a separate school. The Japanese government condemned this policy, claiming it violated an 1894 treaty that gave Japanese citizens the right to enter the United States freely. The issue threatened to become an international crisis.

In response, President Theodore Roosevelt reached a compromise with Japanese officials in 1907. Named the Gentlemen’s Agreement because it was not an official government document, the compromise called on San Francisco to end its school policy and Japan to stop issuing passports to laborers.

Anti-Japanese feeling, however, did not decline. In 1913, California passed the Webb Alien Land Law, which banned alien (noncitizen) Asians from owning farmland.

Immigration From Mexico
In 1902, Congress passed the Newlands National Reclamation Act to promote the irrigation of southwestern lands. Over the next decade, irrigation turned millions of acres of desert into fertile farmland across Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California.

The new farmland meant new jobs in the sparsely populated Southwest. Employers hired Mexican laborers to work on farms and ranches as well as in

VIEWING HISTORY These immigrants from Japan, shown in traditional dress, were known as "picture brides." Their parents arranged their marriages to Japanese men in America by exchanging photos across the Pacific. Drawing Conclusions What challenges did these immigrants face in the United States?
mines. Like Chinese immigrants before them, Mexican workers helped construct railroads, including the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe. Employers valued Mexican immigrants for their skills and their willingness to take difficult jobs at low wages. Roughly 50,000 Mexicans headed north between 1900 and 1910. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, demand increased sharply for laborers to grow and harvest food and mine the copper, coal, and other vital minerals needed for the war effort.

New opportunities were a "pull" factor that drew Mexican workers to America. Turmoil at home was a "push" factor that encouraged them to leave Mexico. The 1910 Mexican Revolution, and the civil war that followed, increased the flow northward over the next decade. One person who lived in a small Mexican village at the time noted:

"Martial law was declared. At the end of 1913, and into 1914, you couldn't even step out of the village because if the government came and found you walking, they killed you. The first village to be burned was Santa Maria, in 1913. . . . It was entirely destroyed. The [soldiers] had burned everything."

—Pedro Martínez

Peasants lost their crops, possessions, and homes to looting and destruction. Soldiers killed many men and drafted others to fight. Perhaps a million Mexicans, ten percent of Mexico's population, lost their lives between 1910 and 1920. Hundreds of thousands chose to come to the United States to escape the violence during this decade.

When the Immigration Restriction Act of 1921 limited immigration from Europe and Asia, labor shortages again drew Mexicans across the border. By 1925, Los Angeles had the largest Spanish-speaking population of any North American city outside of Mexico.