

Eugenics & Immigration in the United States

Case Studies of Jewish Immigrant Experiences

Time: 75-90 minutes

Audience: 7-12th grade

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Understand the connection to eugenics and discrimination in the patterns behind
- immigration to the United States in the late 19th/early 20th century.
- Describe the experience of immigration for Jewish immigrants coming to the United States.
- Analyze the reasons why Jewish immigrants chose to leave their country of origin (push factor) and come to the United States (pull factor).

Aligned Standards

C3: D3.3.6-8; D3.3.9-12

Common Core: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Context

Although it is not necessary to have context prior to beginning this lesson, students may find it helpful to have a basic background of late 19th/early 20th century United States History and/or World History and an understanding of varying forms of oppression, such as racism and antisemitism. For a list of common terms used within this lesson, go to the glossary at the end of the lesson.

Materials Needed

- [Google Slides](#)
- [Ellis Island Oral Interview Jigsaw Student Handout](#)
- [Ellis Island & Immigration Student Assignment](#)

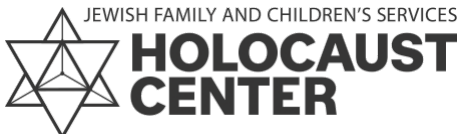
Lesson/Activity

This lesson has been designed for in-person learning but has modifications for **virtual learning** noted in bold throughout the lesson. Please note, due to the challenging themes of hatred and discrimination that this lesson focuses on, it is recommended that you give students a trigger warning about the challenging nature of the subject, frame the lesson as a continuing conversation, and remind students of their options if they feel they need to take a break.

1. This lesson begins with direct instruction centered around Google Slides, and subsequently, uses those slides to guide activities and assignments.

Virtual? This direct instruction could be completed in a flipped-classroom approach, having students interact with a pre-recorded lecture on a platform such as EdPuzzle.

2. **Transition to slide 1.** After opening the slides, begin by telling the students they will be learning about immigration in the United States in the 1920s, using the Jewish immigrant



experience as a case study.

3. **Transition to slide 2.** As you move to Slide 2, ask students: What do you notice about the patterns of immigration on the graph to the right?

Teaching Tip! If you have younger students or those less experienced in reading graphs/charts, assign three different groups- blue, black, red - to correspond to the different colors on the chart, and ask them to note the number of immigrants of each year of arrival. From those values, ask them to draw conclusions on patterns seen.

As students are reporting patterns, emphasize the patterns specific to location and sharp increases. For example, from 1910-1915, both immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Americas (**black**) and those from Southern and Eastern Europe (**red**) rose the most. The numbers seen in the graph correspond to different historical events and a rise in hatred within the United States connected to the Eugenics Movement. Tell the students you will be addressing the latter first.

4. **Transition to slide 3.** The Eugenics Movement in the United States was the major reason for the sheer drop off in immigration around 1915. The movement itself had more than a few key players, but three will be emphasized:

Did you know? The term "eugenics" was first coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883 to explain his pseudoscientific study of race and the cultivation of a superior gene pool through selective breeding. Rooted in racism and other forms of hate, eugenics was used to justify the subjective superiority and inferiority of groups of people, often favoring wealthy white people. Eugenics Movements sprang up first in Great Britain, followed closely by the United States and Germany as well as other industrialized nations, being used as the basis for public policies and thought, like compulsory sterilization (PBS; USHMM).

- *Henry Goddard*, a segregationist, eugenicist, and psychologist, started testing immigrants at Ellis Island in 1913. He was testing these immigrants in English, but most immigrants did not speak English at the time; however, he did not factor this into his study. Instead, he concluded that % Jews, Hungarians, Italians, and Russians were "feeble-minded" and should be deported. At the time, "feeble-minded" was synonymous with inferiority and often associated with immigrants, people of color, those affected by poverty or anyone else deemed "unfit" to those in power (Kline, 2001). Politicians used his eugenics-based study to determine that these groups of people would make the population in the United States and deportations rose by 350%.
- *Harry Laughlin*, one of those politicians, ran the Eugenics Records Office (and eventually ran for presidency... and lost), testified in front of Congress using Goddard's findings. Laughlin had large support from Vice President Calvin Coolidge.
- *Vice President Calvin Coolidge* determined that "America must be kept American. Biological laws show that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races" and signed into law the Johnson-Reed Act. This act had two parts: (1) the National Origins Act of 1924 established immigration quotas or limits on immigration

dependent on location, and (2) the Asian Exclusion Act which completely excluded Asian immigrants from those quotas and denied entry for anyone of Asian descent (Office of the Historian; PBS; Migration Policy Institute, 2013).

5. **Transition to slide 4.** The quotas put into place show the Johnson-Reed Act in action. Ask the students: *Where do you notice the strictest quotas? The loosest?*

Teaching Tip! Not all students are comfortable sharing out in the whole class setting. To differentiate instruction for all learners, provide time for students to think, pair-share, and then, share out into the whole class setting.

Virtual? Invite students to participate verbally or by writing in the chat.

Students will likely note that Germany and other Western European countries had high quotas, while Southern and Eastern Europe alongside “Other Countries” had very little. It’s important to note that Jews were predominantly coming from Southern and Eastern Europe at this time, no Asian countries are listed on the chart, and the African continent is listed as a country.

6. **Transition to slide 5.** These exclusions and wording were very intentional and rooted in the Eugenics Movement and the racism and discrimination it promoted. The wording used to promote eugenics in the United States used terms, like “pure” and “unfit” to denote superiority, whereas, Nazi Germany used a named race, “Aryan” to do the same (Lombardo, 2011). Both did the same thing, intentionally discriminating and oppress groups of people.

Did you know? There is a long history of hatred and prejudice against Jews. Anti-Judaism, or prejudice against Jews dates back to early Christianity. The followers of Jesus, in order to set themselves apart from their own Jewish origins, began to cast surrounding Jews in a negative light. Several passages in the New Testament associate Jews with the killing of Christ; these textual markers became the basis for hateful stereotypes that proliferated and served as a source of violence throughout early and medieval Europe. When the concept of “race” developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, a new form of antisemitism arose in addition to older forms of religious hatred. This new, race-based hatred grouped people together based on their biology, or blood. It erroneously suggested that some groups, including Jews, were biologically inferior to other peoples.

Prompt the students to dive into the chart from the Kansas State Free Fair, a statewide fair that had one of the largest Eugenics exhibits in the United States, further: *who is seen as “pure”?* *What is the intention of this chart?* *What do you think people learned coming to this exhibit?* *Why might this have been at the state fair?*

7. **Transition to slide 6.** As these exhibits and laws were on the rise, official ports of entry and immigration centers were established to regulate immigration and ensure only the “fit” entered the nation:
- The picture on the left is of Ellis Island, located on an island off of New York City on the East Coast.

- The picture of the right is of Angel Island, located on an island off of San Francisco in the San Francisco Bay.

The profile of immigrants looked different for both immigration stations. Ask your students the following: *based on location, where do they think immigrants came from for both immigration centers?*

Ellis Island received larger numbers of European immigrants, whereas, Angel Island saw much larger numbers of Russian and Asian immigrants until the exclusionary laws were put into place.

8. **Transition to slide 7.** Because of the establishment of these centers and the sharp increase in immigration, historians see this as a defining moment for U.S. immigration, giving new terms to the type of immigrants seen in the U.S.
- Immigrants who came to the U.S. 1800s or before were known as the “old immigrant,” hailing from Northern/Western Europe and being predominantly Protestant or Christian. These “old immigrants” saw themselves as “native” to the nation, often exhibiting nativism (discrimination against immigrants) or xenophobia (dislike or hatred against people from a country not your own) to the newer immigrants, known as the “new immigrant.”
 - The profile of the “new immigrant” was very different from the “old.” They came almost 80 years later and from very different locations, most hailing from Southern and Eastern Europe or Asia with a few from the continents of Africa and South and Central America. In addition to location differences, the “new immigrants’ were also different religions from the “old,” identifying as Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox Christian.

Based on this description, have the students summarize the main differences between the two immigrant profiles.

Students should understand the major differences in profile of “new” and “old” immigrants, focusing on location, religion, time period.

Teaching Tip! If you are splitting this lesson into multiple classes, this is a great place to stop as it allows for an easy recall activity at the start of the next class, prompting students with the question: how was the profile of immigrants different between the “new” and the “old”?

9. **Transition to slide 8.** Regardless of profile, reasons for immigration are generally categorized into two major categories: push and pull factors.
- Push factors are reasons that might “push” one out of their country of origin, such as famine, disease, war, oppressive taxes, government corruption, living conditions, and oppression.

- Pull factors, on the other hand, are reasons that might pull one from their country of origin to the country they immigrate to. Often these factors are centered in opportunities seen, like jobs, money, and freedom, or stories told.

Prompt students to dive into their prior knowledge by asking them the following question: *What is happening in the United States and the world from the late 1800s to early 1900s to push and pull folks out of their country of origin and to the United States as the “new immigrant”?*

Students may mention “push” events like the instability in the economy after WWI and/or the rise in antisemitism, hatred or prejudice against Jews, connected to pogroms or rise of Nazi Germany, or “pull” events such as the Gold Rush and/or industrialization and job opportunities in cities. For Jewish people, in particular, the reason for the sharp rise in immigration from 1910-1939 has to do with the rise in antisemitism.

10. **Transition to slide 9.** The Jewish experience throughout this time period will be used as a case study for the remainder of the lesson to continue learning about both push and pull factors as well as experiences of entry into Ellis Island.

Students will do this by engaging in a jigsaw activity called “Ellis Island Oral Interview Jigsaw.” For this activity, students will need the Student Handout hyperlinked in the materials section of this lesson plan.

- Divide the class into 6 expert groups - one for each interview.
- Give the students time to read, write and discuss the questions applied to their interview.
- After students have time to discuss, move the students into groups where there is a representative from each interview.
- Have the students share out what they learned and have each mixed group determine commonalities and differences amongst their interviews.

Virtual? Turn this jigsaw into a scaffolded discussion board to continue the learning and jumpstart the conversation online.

Teaching Tip! Short on time? Have the expert groups teach out to the whole class to combine the exchange of knowledge and debrief.

11. **Transition to slide 10.** Debrief the activity as a whole class and then move on to the “Ellis Island & Immigration Student Assignment” hyperlinked in the materials section, which has students apply and analyze the knowledge they learned to one of three essential questions of choice connected to the learning objectives within this lesson.

The students will create an argumentative or persuasive paragraph, using both primary and secondary evidence from the class.

Please note, the assignment is scaffolded for students in high school so adjust as necessary to fit your students' levels.

Teaching Tip! This lesson finishes focusing on the oral histories of Jewish Americans at Ellis Island. Students will likely be interested in learning more about those histories or the histories behind folks who immigrated through Angel Island, the immigration center on the West Coast introduced within the lesson. View the “Supplementary Resources” below to gain resources and lesson ideas to teach these next and aligned topics.

Next Steps? History comes alive through primary sources like those seen in this lesson. To learn about incorporating archival materials into your curriculum or bringing a survivor of genocide to your classroom through our [Speaker's Bureau Program](#), contact the JFCS Holocaust Center (holocaustcenter@jfcs.org).

Supplemental Resources

- [Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation](#) has many curriculum guides focused on the history of Angel Island. Their “Curriculum Guide - Lesson 9” explores the oral histories of Angel Island Immigrants and could act as an accompaniment to this lesson.
- The complete transcript from the interviews used in this lesson and additional testimonies from Ellis Island can be found in [Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words](#).
- To access the unedited interview transcripts and manifests from the immigration center, the [Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Foundation](#) has both.
- To access lesson plans about the [History of European Antisemitism](#) or [Jewish Americans](#), visit our colleagues at the Institute of Curriculum Services (ICS).

Glossary

Antisemitism: Beginning in ancient times and continuing to the present day, this is the name for the hatred or prejudice against Jewish people as a group for being Jewish.

Eugenics: A discredited pseudoscientific study or practice of improving the human race through selective reproduction of desirable traits that were used as justification to racially oppress different groups throughout the 20th century.

Nativism: The belief that often translates into policy that the interests of native inhabitants of a place need to be protected from immigrants. Native does usually mean indigenous and is usually subjective.

Pogrom: An organized massacre against a named group of people, usually an ethnic or cultural group. Pogroms against Jewish people in Russia and Eastern Europe were common in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Race: A social construct society uses to place individuals into categories based on physical characteristics.

Racism: The hatred or prejudice against a person based on their race.

Xenophobia: The strong prejudice, dislike, and sometimes fear, of people from other countries, usually applied to immigrants and nativist policies.

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Ellis Island, New York, 1910. Public Health Service Historical Photograph File, 1880 - 1943, Record Group 90; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [online version available through the Archival Research Catalog (ARC identifier 6235189) at www.archives.gov; January 31, 2022.

Eugenics Charts from the Kansas Free Fair, Kansas, USA, 1929. American Eugenics Society Records (Mss.575.06.Am3). Courtesy of American Philosophical Society Library.

Immigration to the United States, 1870-1920. Copyright United States Census Bureau.

Photograph of Immigrants Arriving at the Immigration Station on Angel Island, 1912-1939. Public Health Service Historical Photograph File, 1880 - 1943, Record Group 90. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [online version available through the Archival Research Catalog (ARC identifier 595673) at www.archives.gov; February 1, 2022.

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