

The Trump Administration and Immigration: Lessons from Jewish History

By Jenny Sartori

It will come as no surprise that the recent Executive Orders on immigration and refugees – denying entry into the United States of citizens of several Muslim-majority countries, suspending the admission of refugees into the country, and reducing the overall number of refugees allowed in – have come under heavy criticism from Jewish historians.

Until the turn of the 20th century, Jews, along with many others, benefited from policies that left immigration to the United States largely unrestricted, with the notable exception of the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, anti-immigration sentiment rose rapidly, as Americans buffeted by industrialization, urbanization, and social change grew increasingly fearful of newcomers – or at least of newcomers they saw as alien in religion, ethnicity, race, or ideology or even as genetically inferior. The end result was the 1924 National Origins Act, which severely limited immigration into the United States, especially of people from Southern and Eastern Europe and Africa, and outright banned immigration of Arabs and Asians.

As is well known, the consequences of immigration restriction based on national origin were catastrophic for Jews. The numbers of Jewish immigrants dropped precipitously in 1925. Even worse, Central and Eastern European Jews threatened by Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s found themselves unable to immigrate to the United States even though national quotas were never even close to filled, and even the quota for German immigrants was filled only once during the quota. In May 1939, the United States government refused to admit approximately 900 Jewish refugees aboard the SS *St. Louis* and the ship was forced to return to Europe, where approximately one third of its passengers died in the Holocaust. Even after the war ended in 1945, Jewish refugees continued to face hurdles in their efforts to immigrate to the United States.

Support for the 1924 National Origins Act was fueled by anti-Semitism and inflated rhetoric about the physical dangers posed by Jewish revolutionaries and the physical, moral, and cultural dangers posed by immigrants in general. Even in the late 1930s and early 1940s, as Jews were literally fleeing for their lives, the U.S. government barred their entry based on reported security threats supported by the flimsiest of evidence. In a chilling parallel, Trump's Executive Orders are motivated by Islamophobia and exaggerated statements about the terrorist threat posed by Muslim immigrants, who are also falsely portrayed as hostile to an American way of life. The lessons of Jewish history should be clear: closing borders to people on the basis of religious, ethnic, or racial identity is dangerous, closed-minded, and a betrayal of our founding values. Quotas based on national origin had a devastating impact on world Jewry in the past. Let them not have a similar impact on the Muslim world in the future.