

The AMERICAN LEGION Weekly

November 17, 1922: p. 3

Both Sides of the Closed Door

America's Immigration Problem
as It Looks Viewed from Within
and from Without

By Stephen Graham



THOSE prophets were wrong who said there would not be enough men left after the war, and that newspapers and governments would be encouraging the birth rate with premiums and immigration with propaganda. There has been no "baby-boom." On the contrary, there has been a boom in the subject of birth-control. And the immigration door has been shut. The world has become very discouraging to new arrivals and strangers. There is no longer question of making up the number of those lost in the World War. Indeed, there seems, for the time being, to be enough people everywhere—and more than enough in most places.

One thing is certain, and that is, that if it were possible to open the immigration door of the United States, and give free access to all and sundry who want to come in; there would be a surge forward of indigent masses westward such as never was seen before in American history.

This is because, on the one hand, Europe swarms with ruined populations and homeless people, and on the other, America has become a sort of legendary country of wealth and opportunity, an El Dorado. Europeans who have been to America and come back to their own country habitually give America a good name, tell of the high wages, and exaggerate the blessedness of the workingman's lot. They may have cursed their employers and gone on strike and said many rash things whilst in America, but once they get to Europe they remember only the bright side. And they wax eloquent over that, gilding the gold and perfuming the roses.

And America truly has been a wonderful field for making money. Before the war, European governments, even that of Russia, encouraged emigration to America because of the returning

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Both Sides of the Closed Door

flow of dollars to the home families. I raised the matter once with M. Sazonof, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs. Was it not a pity that 90,000 genuine Russian peasants should forsake their lands each year to go and work in America? "On the contrary," said Sazonof, "I think it a good thing. It brings money into the village, and, God knows, our peasants are too poor."

As regards the case of Italy, the flow of American dollars to that country has caused not a little flurry in the minds of American economists. Italy is notorious. It may almost be said that she resuscitated the Plate Fleet before the war.

Personally, I believe America gained more by alien labor than the foreign countries did by the gold. But the

situation today is very different. America is nothing like the El Dorado she was before the war. She does not offer the scope, the opportunity, that she did. For one reason or another, the great rate of industrial expansion has slowed down. There is no longer a labor shortage anywhere. There is generally a surplus, and it is by no

means as easy as it was for an unemployed man to obtain a new job. He may have to wait, to wait a long while, and then accept something less paying than what he has left. It is true that if the immigration flood were to break down the dam there are many newcomers who would do well. But they would only do so by displacing men who are here already. They would be ready to take lower wages to start with. In fact, it is there that American organized labor finds its rooted opposition to unlimited immigration.

It may be an unfortunate way of naming it, but in current labor language every new immigrant is a potential blackleg. It is hinted always that the employer favors immigration for that simple reason, that immigrant labor is cheap, and the use of a quantity of it keeps down wages all round. The employers' passion in these meaner after-the-war days is always "reduction of costs," and his pay-roll lingers under his lowering brows. He would like to cut it down extensively.

Another aspect of the matter is the political one, and there the employer, if he be a patriot, is more in agreement with his men on the immigration question. The war made it clear that the possession of a vast mass of unassimilated foreigners is not a

Both Sides of the Closed Door

strength but a weakness to a nation. Their sympathies are not in the land where they are working, but away in Europe with the people of their homes. They become organized, they carry on intrigue, they are capable of aiding dangerous minorities in American political groups. They are carrying on correspondence in all the languages of Europe. Some join in demonstrations, carry banners, throw bombs, and are at the least an extra responsibility for the military and the police.

And even those who have settled in the country and got the name of being "good Americans" are capable of reverting to their earlier allegiance. At best, they know little of the struggles and ideals of the Republic they have joined.

That is the American aspect of the situation. What they think of it over in Europe is naturally something very different.

First of all, it should be borne in mind that hundreds of thousands of people are desperate. It is reckoned there are something over two million uprooted Russians alone, living by their wits or starving in every capital of Europe. Add to that, the whole Russian nation in Russia is in dreadful durance. All has gone wrong there. There are no markets, no opportunities for ambition, no normal scope for human incentives. To the Russians in Russia America is a magical word. How many dream of America—if only they could get out, if only they could get to her!

Many Russians do escape, get across into Bessarabia or into Poland, and go straight to the shipping office or the American consul. Or they get to Riga and Libau and stow away on German ships. I have seen these unfortunates—bedraggled, gaunt, with faces in which the history of Russia was written, but with a strange light in their eyes, the joy of escape and the faith in a new life. How the shipping offices on the Marzalkowsky at Warsaw swarm with those who cannot possibly find ingress to America!

First of all, they are astonished by the material difficulties. The passage alone costs three times what it did. The present steerage fare is the same as pre-war first class. On top of that, the new visa fee. Why, at the present rates of exchange, the head-tax of eight dollars alone is more than these people can pay! It has become absurd for

Both Sides of the Closed Door

them to think of working and saving enough to take them over. If they have not some unusual source of wealth there is no question of their ever confronting the United States immigration officials at Ellis Island.

There are, in fact, only two small classes of immigrants who are in a position to claim admission to America; they are, the partly-ruined rich who have jewels, and those who have relatives in America rich enough to send them the price of the passage across.

Their fate depends first on the local American consul. Generally he makes a searching inquiry into their affairs. He refuses the visa to many. And even to those to whom he grants a visa he says, "I give you a visa, but that does not mean you will get admitted when you arrive at the other side. I cannot guarantee that."

There I think the immigrant has a legitimate grievance against the United States authorities. Once a visa has been granted it should be equivalent to a permit to enter the country. It costs the substantial sum of ten dollars and often an enormous amount of worry and correspondence. It seems unfair that after all that the immigrant should be rejected on a legal point.

I came over last year with an Austrian family who had sold up their home, their farm, and most of their furniture, and said good-bye to every friend and relative they had. There were five of them. They sang, one played the piano, they played chess, they studied. They were all in the midst of life. Imagine their dismay when in New York harbor they were told, "Austria's quota has already been exceeded for this year," and despite visas, despite everything, they were repatriated, as it is called.

Whilst it does seem most expedient to curtail immigration, it ought to be done in a way which would impose least hardship on those who after all have had a supreme belief in America. One of America's weaknesses lies in red tape, did it need to be said; another lies in a sort of contempt for the poor

Both Sides of the Closed Door

whites of Europe—the “Wops” and the “Kikes” and the “Dagoes” and “Hunkies” and the rest. They are unfortunate—after all, that is the chief thing against them.

With regard to the passport visa, it seems to me it would be wise to reduce the fee to a merely nominal fifty cents. Ten dollars does not seem much for once, but it is the highest fee charged in the world and has set the scale for all the other nations. The passport visa in Europe has become one of the obstructions in the way of the free movement of peoples. Free movement would go far to settle the war-stricken masses. It seems illogical on America's part to set a bad economic example where she is most concerned. These populations cannot find work, cannot find settled homes, cannot find lost relatives. They starve. Then enters Hoover and his organization, all praise to it, takes over the responsibility of feeding them. Help them to get together in Europe and there would be less starvation and a less clamorous demand for “America.”

It seems also that reliable information concerning conditions in America is greatly lacking in Europe. In England there is no delusion. The common saying there is that “America is even worse off than we are.” But Central Europe, and especially the German parts, cherish the dream that America is paradise. Perhaps for the German, apprehensive of the work he has to do paying reparations, America is comparatively a paradise. But he thinks of it as it was in 1914, largely unaltered, firmly believing that Milwaukee is still famous for beer, and the rest. As for the Russians, they have been sedulously plied with Bolshevik government propaganda on the subject of America. Trotsky, being an ex-New Yorker, naturally has had America in his mind a great deal. America has been hailed as the land most ripe for a Bolshevik revolution. The strikes of the last few years have been painted in the most lurid colors. You would have thought by Russian reports that capitalistic America was on her knees fighting for her life, and a dictatorship of the proletariat was about to be announced with a strong revolutionary committee of hitherto unheard-of names. Visitors from America to Russia who tried, like “Comrade” Schwartz, to tell another story were promptly jailed.

But whilst the Russian leaders know that their story of America is false, they have also partially deceived themselves. They do believe that America is the weakest link in the capitalistic chain of nations. And they would do anything to make their dreams of breakage come true. England, for the time being, they have given up as a hopeless field. But they believe that if they could get the right people into America they could hasten the socialistic regeneration of the world as they understand it, very rapidly.

That motive is grasped at Washington, and the American Government has faced Russia with a harder front than any other nation, excluding France.

Both Sides of the Closed Door

The door remains absolutely shut to the political propagandist who believes in revolution. In fact, no one can get into America now without signing a paper to the effect that he is not in favor of the overthrow of organized government as at present constituted. And until the homeless and starved masses of Europe find peace of soul in Europe and their pulse steadies and their delirium ceases, the veto of Washington will remain. It cannot deny the right of revolution wholly, since America herself, Constitution and all, is founded on a revolution, but it can withstand a force of revolution fomented from outside the Republic.

Five years is the common time limit set to the present restriction of immigration. It may easily prove to be fifty. Five years will hardly see Europe's house in order. Five years are likely to see strifes innumerable. Within five years, surely, the wall between Russia and the outside world will somehow be broken down. And then what a rush of exodus to America one may expect, a great rush, and a resolute steadying of a closed door that keeps the Russians out.

In five years will not America have withdrawn herself even farther from European entanglements and be even more apprehensive? The European debts to the United States will by that time have been repudiated, most of them. A "never again!" chorus will have inevitably gone through the whole press, swelled by the voices of most Americans. And a money obligation not discharged is a notorious breeder of cold feelings.

Nevertheless, it is rash to prophesy much about our complicated Old World and the ambitious New one. America herself may not remain as she is. The United States have now an Empire. The possession of Panama has effectively raised the flag of overlordship. Whether liberal idealists like it or not, America goes forth as the protector of the Latin-American peoples—at least of those peoples who live north of the Canal and of those who inhabit the Indies. America already looks southward. If the States overflow they will first overflow toward the south. There lies the way of expansion, a tremendous commercial and agricultural expansion, calling in time perhaps for hundreds of thousands of extra human hands. When the real need comes for renewed immigration on a large scale the door will no doubt be opened wide once more and masses come streaming in. Then probably half the political restrictions enforced today will be tacitly foregone.

The main motive for keeping the door shut now is that the immigrant is not wanted. That being the case, it is easy to multiply reasons why he is unwelcome.

The main motive of the million-fold mass that wants to come to America is that they are unhappy and hopeless where they are. That being the case—once more it may be said, it would be easy to multiply reasons why they want to come.

Both Sides of the Closed Door

Does the closed door impair the prestige of America in Europe? Not a whit.

Will the opening of it increase America's prestige? No; no more than keeping it shut.

Does keeping the door closed do America any harm? No.

Does it harm those it keeps out? No. Not really.

Do the consuls and immigration officials handle their task in such a way as to keep out all the unwanted people and yet cause only a minimum of disappointment? I cannot say that they do



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