

The End of Chinese Exclusion Part 1 - Background 1924-1943 By Philip Chin

Before World War I immigration had reached a high of over a million a year before temporary wartime immigration restrictions had been added by the Immigration Act of 1917. The excuse for these laws was that revolutionaries in Russia had overthrown the Russian imperial government who were then in turn overthrown by the communists. The resulting hysteria of the "Red Scare" led to unjustified fears across the United States that communists would also try to overthrow the American government. Opponents of immigration used the opportunity to attack a whole range of targets with legislation.

The Immigration Act of 1917 among other things barred homosexuals, idiots, feeble-minded persons, criminals, epileptics, insane persons, alcoholics, professional beggars, all persons mentally or physically defective, polygamists, and anarchists from coming to the United States. The law also added a literacy test for all prospective immigrants over the age of 16. The law also made it far easier to deport foreign born radicals and suspected communists. Most importantly to most Asians it created a so-called "Asiatic Barred Zone" whose inhabitants were completely banned from immigrating to the United States. Chinese had already been covered by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and subsequent restrictive laws and Japanese by the "Gentleman's Agreement of 1907" whereby Japan voluntarily restricted Japanese immigration. America's doors were now almost completely closed towards Asian immigration.



The 1924 National Origins Act (aka Immigration Act of 1924) had three goals: Immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe would be even more severely restricted. Immigration from Northern and Western Europe would be encouraged. Immigration from Asia and other non-white parts of the world would be completely banned.

Jews, Italians, and Slavs in particular were targets because they constituted the greatest percentage of immigrants to America from the 1890s through the 1920s. Because of their different cultural and religious backgrounds these groups were regarded as unassimilable by the white Protestant ruling classes in America. The fact that these poor immigrants lived in appalling ethnic ghettos and were disproportionately arrested and convicted of crimes, all constantly highlighted by alarmist headlines in the popular media, was regarded as additional proof positive of their unsuitability for American life. Many white Americans had forgotten that the same slurs had been applied to the Irish immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s and previously against Germans in the 18th Century.

In addition, several other groups were pushing for immigration restrictions for their own purposes. Samuel Gompers, leader of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and other labor unions allied with the AFL were strong supporters of the legislation because it reduced immigrant labor competition against organized labor. They were allied with American nativist groups such as the Immigration Restriction League which supported immigration only by Western European Protestants, people exactly like themselves. Influential politicians such as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge supported their efforts under the banner of Americanism.

Congressman Albert Johnson, Republican of Washington, the House sponsor of the act, was an avowed racist who openly talked about defending the "Nordic race" from the Jews. He'd been elected on an anti-immigrant platform in 1914 and claimed to have been part of a mob organized by the Asiatic Exclusion League that had beaten, robbed, and chased South Asians (Sikhs) out of Bellingham, Washington in 1907. In 1923, he'd become President of the Eugenics Research Association which opposed interracial marriages and wrote pseudo-scientific papers supporting the eugenic sterilization of "unfit" people, meaning the mentally and physically handicapped. Their words were later cited by Nazi Germany to support their policies for the sterilization and then mass extermination of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and the mentally and physically handicapped. Time Magazine in 1926, after the passage of the National Origins Act, wrote that the national Ku Klux Klan had four top political priorities, among which was the "Renomination and re-election of Representative Albert Johnson of Washington, so he can continue to be Chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and fight for restricted immigration laws."¹

The National Origins Act used a formula that allowed only 2% to enter from each country based upon the national origins of the population found in the 1890 Census when a far higher proportion of the population had come from Western and Northern Europe. Immigration that in 1920 was running at just 355,000 persons per year were

¹ http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/kkk_politicians.htm

then reduced to just 165,000 (reduced even further to 150,000 by 1929) of which only 12% were from Southern and Eastern Europe. America had essentially shut the door against immigration by some Europeans to just a crack and completely shut it against Asians and the rest of the world.²

Meanwhile in China, the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 had left a weak national government under Sun Yat-sen and his Kuomintang Party (Nationalist Party) which had been quickly supplanted by regional warlords that divided and decimated the country in incessant fighting. In 1927, the Kuomintang, now under General Chiang Kai-shek, reunified the country by military force but left many influential autonomous warlords scattered across the countryside. Chiang then turned on his communist allies and had them massacred. The surviving communists under Mao Tse-tung continued a guerilla war against Chiang.

In 1931, Japan invaded Northern China and occupied Manchuria, installing a puppet government under the last Qing Emperor who'd lost power in 1911. Having lost the support of the Soviet Union after killing the Chinese communists Chiang had no international allies. He ended up relying for help and equipment on Germany, which had no more territorial interests in China after losing its Chinese colonies in World War I. Germany now only wanted commercial ties with China unlike the British, French, and Americans who still held territorial concessions and colonies in China. The British and French in particular had greatly expanded their territories across the world as a result of World War I and had supported the Japanese takeover of German colonies in China in the aftermath of World War I instead of returning them to China despite President Woodrow Wilson's empty vow that national self-determination had been a goal for which America had been fighting the war. China saw no reason to trust the Europeans and Americans any further than they had to as a result.

Relations between Nazi Germany after they assumed power in 1933 and the Republic of China were fairly close. Chiang's adopted son, Chiang Wei-kuo, studied at a military academy in Munich and became a lieutenant in the German Army, then participated in the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938. German trained and equipped Kuomintang divisions formed the first line of defense for the Republic of China. Relations began cooling in 1936 when Germany allied with Japan and war broke out between China and Japan in 1937. German military advisors were finally withdrawn at the beginning of 1938 because of Japanese complaints but not before helping the Chinese put up a stubborn defense and inflict devastating losses against the Japanese around Nanjing.

Japan installed a puppet Chinese government under Wang Jingwei in Nanjing after the city fell. By late 1941 the Japanese held all of Northeastern China and most of the coastal regions of China and had driven the Kuomintang deep into the interior of the country. British and American commercial contracts, less than covert help from the ostensibly neutral Soviet Union (which had fought a brief border war in Manchuria against Japan in 1938-1939) and later the American Lend-Lease program, kept a trickle of supplies arriving that enabled the Kuomintang to continue the war.

² Jonathan Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*, UPNE, 2009, pp.220-233

On December 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy struck American, British, and Dutch military bases and territories across the Pacific including the main American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The US Pacific Fleet was decimated in the surprise attack with almost all its battleships sunk or badly damaged. The Japanese quickly occupied countries across the Pacific and Southeast Asia shocking the Western world with images of white soldiers surrendering to them. The United States declared war on Japan on December 8th. On December 11th, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States.

President Franklin Roosevelt decided that the United States would pursue a "Europe First" policy of beating the Germans and Italians before completing the fight against the Japanese. Key to this policy was the fact that bulk of the Imperial Japanese Army never went to the Pacific to fight the Americans. At the start of 1942, a full 80% of the Imperial Japanese Army were stuck in garrisons and operations across Manchuria and China. In fact a majority of Japanese troops remained in Manchuria and China until after 1944. By 1945, at the very end of the war, China still had over a million Japanese troops in occupation even after the best units and their equipment had been withdrawn to join the garrison of the Japanese home islands (two million regular Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) soldiers, two million in reserve) against an Allied invasion fleet that never came before the Japanese surrender. This left a total of two million Japanese army troops and a million others (mostly what little remained of the Imperial Japanese Navy) scattered across Asia and the Pacific, just a fraction of which were in position to fight the Americans.

The Battle for Guadalcanal fought from August 1942 to February 1943 showed just how hideous combat with Japanese forces would be. The Japanese forces had been taken by surprise and their defenses had been incomplete when they were attacked. Reinforcements were rushed in piecemeal and often their efforts were uncoordinated. Nevertheless, out of the 36,000 Japanese ground troops committed to the battle, a full 31,000 (86%) were killed with only about a thousand taken prisoner. Rather than surrender the majority of the remaining disease ridden and starving Japanese troops, with no hope left of being evacuated, had preferred to go out fighting or commit suicide. It was clear that the United States would lose many men in the fight to defeat Japan especially as they drove deeper into territory where the Japanese had had time to prepare their defenses.

The key worry then for the United States was that China would make a separate peace with Japan and free up millions of Japanese soldiers to fight in the Pacific. Racist laws and immigration policies, violence against the Chinese, and decades of overheated rhetoric and blatantly racist discrimination were now coming back to haunt the Americans.

The potent slogan of "Asia for Asians" bolstered by the ugly truth of history that many Asians had personally experienced at the hands of Americans and European colonialists was being broadcast daily across Asia in Japanese propaganda radio. It was the reason why Japanese troops had been greeted across Asia by many as liberators when the

Americans and Europeans surrendered. Unfortunately for them the Japanese proved to be even more brutal and stupidly racist than the whites had been, forcibly recruiting Asians as slave laborers under appalling conditions among many other war crimes. Nevertheless, by 1943, about 650,000 Chinese were serving with the collaborationist armed forces in China. This situation was repeated in many other Asian countries occupied by Japan where the natives eagerly cheered Japan on, at least at first.

A major propaganda effort had been waged by Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang in the United States since the renewed outbreak of fighting in 1937 to gain American support for the Chinese war effort. The truth, as amplified by Kuomintang propaganda and by the Chinese American community, was powerful enough. Americans were appalled by the newsreel images of the aftermath of indiscriminate Japanese air attacks that killed Chinese civilians and news of mass atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre. Such public revulsion led to a major American boycott of Japanese goods and later to the official cutoff of sales of oil and scrap metal in 1940.

One of the major assets in the Chinese propaganda effort was Soong May-Ling, the wife of General Chiang. She'd been educated in the United States since she was a child and graduated from Wellesley College with a degree in English literature. She not only spoke fluent English but understood Americans, especially the ruling classes with whom she'd been educated. Time Magazine senior editor and co-founder, Henry Luce, who'd been born in China, was a close friend and frequently featured her and her husband favorably in his magazine. The elegant and beautiful Madame Chiang was treated as a celebrity in the American press, which regularly glossed over the negative aspects of the Kuomintang regime on her behalf.

On February 18, 1943, she became the first Chinese and only the second woman to ever address a joint session of Congress. Her speech lavishly praised American soldiers and reminded American audiences of the immense sacrifices that China had undergone in 5 1/2 years of war. She assured Congress that China would remain a faithful ally with American support but Americans could only wonder just how much more sacrifice China could take after losing so much territory and so many millions of its soldiers.

It was in this tense atmosphere that Congress began to examine the idea of repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943.