

Immigration: INS Records, 1880–1930

Look into the fascinating investigations made by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) during the massive immigration wave at the turn of the twentieth century. The files in this module cover Asian immigration, especially Japanese and Chinese migration, to California, Hawaii, and other states; Mexican immigration to the U.S. from 1906-1930, and European immigration. There are also extensive files on the INS's regulation of prostitution and white slavery and on suppression of radical aliens.

Asian Immigration and Exclusion, 1898–1941, consists of the most important INS files dealing with the immigration of Asians, the only ethnic group excluded by law. These records document the numerous avenues through which Asian immigrants evaded federal inspectors to settle in America, as well as federal efforts to uphold the law. Documents include analyses of employment opportunities for Asians (especially in Hawaii, which was exempted from the exclusionary law); the transfer of Asians from Hawaii to the mainland; the widespread smuggling of Asian laborers across the Mexican and Canadian borders; and the use of strategic marriages of Asian immigrants to naturalized Asians, especially in California. Many files also document the State Department's relations with China and Japan regarding immigration.

Other highlights of the Asian immigration files include responses to “tong wars” in Chinatowns across the United States, efforts by western and southern agribusiness to import Chinese laborers during World War I, surveillance of liquor and narcotics smuggling, and crackdowns on prostitution.

Mexican Immigration, 1906–1930, the second major subject area in this module, documents the economic and political incentives behind the cross-border movement between Mexico and the United States from 1906 to 1930. Coverage extends from the period of relatively open immigration before World War I through the more restrictive policy in the 1920s. These files are especially valuable for research in economic and labor history, U.S. immigration legislation and policies, the treatment of legal and illegal immigrants in the United States, the development of the Southwest, and U.S.–Mexican relations. Prior to 1910, files detail the railroads' legal importation of Mexicans for temporary track labor. Records show a growing demand for farm laborers in the Southwest. After the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, a flood of refugees sought safety in the United States, presenting America with one of its earliest crises on refugee policy. The Taft and Wilson administrations' policy responses are documented extensively in the collection. The files also contain in-depth reports on the sociology of refugee camps as well as the values and aspirations of Mexican and other refugees.

Attention to the Mexican border intensified again in 1917 with World War I and its attendant labor shortages. Records track the guest worker program developed by the federal government to respond to the wartime needs of many agribusinesses and industries.



A. A. Seraphie, an immigration officer in disguise, as he investigated conditions along the border between Mexico and the United States in 1906 and 1907.



Throughout the 19th century and most of the 20th century, the port of New York was the major reception point for immigration to the United States. By 1900, the flow of immigrants was channeled through the new federal immigration station on Ellis Island.

Ellis Island, 1900–1933, the third major set of records in this module, features the reports and correspondence of inspectors general and immigration commissioners for the port of New York such as Terence V. Powderly, William Williams, Robert Watchorn, and Frederick C. Howe. These files detail the administration of virtually every aspect of immigration law and policy from medical examinations and deportation

policies to press relations and dealings with the city of New York. Included also are several exhaustive reports by outside experts commissioned in response to allegations of corruption or mishandling of immigrants.

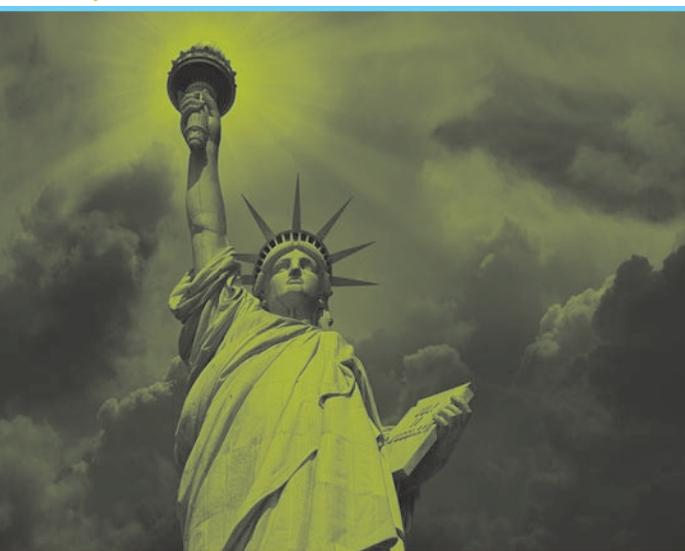
European Investigations, 1898–1936, the fourth major series, brings together the many investigative reports that the INS made in Europe between 1898 and World War I, as well as a smaller but valuable amount of material on the post-WWI period, up to the mid-1930s.

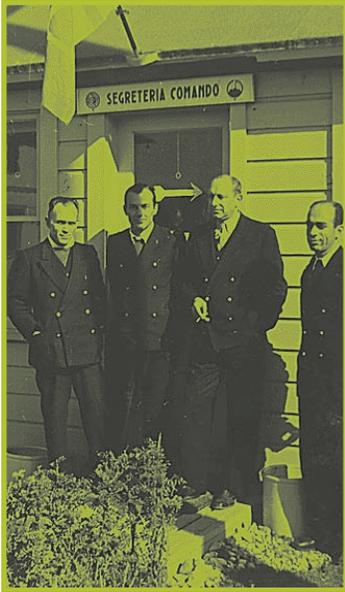
The European Investigations cover conditions throughout Europe that gave rise to migration and frequently include eyewitness accounts. Inspector Terence Powderly, former head of the Knights of Labor, reported on labor conditions in Europe and the ease with which the U.S. prohibition against alien contract laborers could be breached. Inspector Philip Cowen, a founder of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, toured Russia and Galicia after the pogroms of 1905, recounting witnesses' statements and detailing Jews' wages and living conditions. Inspectors Robert Watchorn and John Trenor attempted to discern the source of the Italian "Black Hand" organization in 1907 and 1908. They filed reports on alleged criminal classes in Italy and Sicily and negotiated with Italian emigration officials on the need to screen criminals from American immigration.

The INS was the first federal authority to police prostitution. Prostitutes were excluded from settling in the United States by the Immigration Act of 1875, and the revised Immigration Act of 1903 made it possible to deport a prostitute up to three years after the date of arrival. As a result, the INS took on the responsibility of screening for prostitutes at immigration stations and also for helping to identify resident alien prostitutes who settled in America. This resulted in the compilation of massive documentary evidence on the practice of prostitution.



Prostitution and White Slavery, 1902–1933, addresses the issues of coercion in female prostitution, the United States government's response to urban criminal networks, and American attitudes toward sex in the early 20th century. The records also document INS investigations of prostitution in Europe as well as in the United States. After the revised Immigration Act of 1907, the INS grew more vigilant about excluding prostitutes. The agency developed suspect profiles from ships' manifests and inspected second-class passenger cabins for evidence. Immigration inspector Marcus Braun made an extensive survey of the culture and networks of prostitution in Europe. His reports are a major component of this section of files.





Pursuing its mandate to deport alien prostitutes, the INS launched a vast national investigation of red-light districts and prostitution networks. The investigations of 1908–1909 yielded extensive reports on every known brothel, procurer, and prostitution network in scores of areas.

The Mann Act of 1910 targeted the interstate transport of women for prostitution. Following this act, the INS shared jurisdiction over prostitution with the Justice Department. Numerous files detail the INS role in investigating deportation cases under the Mann Act.

Suppression of Aliens, the final section of files in this module, focuses on the suppression of aliens in 1917 and 1918. There are documents from throughout the country, but the emphasis is on Seattle, with attention also paid to Milwaukee, Boston, Cleveland, and San Francisco. Italian and Russian immigrants are covered in extensive detail but there are also files on immigrants from Jewish, German, British, and Mexican backgrounds.

Government officials were especially concerned with immigrants belonging to two different organizations: the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Union of Russian Workers. A number of notable figures from these organizations and the anarchist movement more broadly appear in the collection, including Luigi Galleani, George Andreytchine, Giovanni Baldazzi, Emma Goldman, and Salvatore Schillaci. On the government side, notable correspondents include Commissioner General of Immigration Anthony Caminetti and Assistant Secretary of Labor Louis F. Post. One especially valuable feature of these records is the interrogations that appear in most case files. In nearly every deportation investigation, the subject was questioned by immigration officials, often on a number of occasions. As a result, most files contain at least five to ten pages of interview transcripts. The political nature of many of the records in this module, coupled with the prominence of the immigration debate during the Progressive era, will make the collection of interest to students of immigration and political, economic, and labor historians.



Collection List

Immigration: INS Records, 1880-1930

Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Series A: Subject Correspondence Files

- Part 1: Asian Immigration and Exclusion, 1906–1913
- Part 1: Supplement: Asian Immigration and Exclusion, 1898–1941
- Part 2: Mexican Immigration, 1906–1930
- Part 3: Ellis Island, 1900–1933
- Part 4: European Investigations, 1898–1936
- Part 5: Prostitution and White Slavery, 1902–1933
- Part 6: Suppression of Aliens

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