

Maha, Sorin-Stefan

Article

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Suggested Citation: Maha, Sorin-Stefan (2011) : The Migration of Europeans to the United States at the Middle of the 19th Century – the Irish and German Wave, CES Working Papers, ISSN 2067-7693, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Centre for European Studies, Iasi, Vol. 3, Iss. 4, pp. 556-562

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/198146>

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THE MIGRATION OF EUROPEANS TO THE UNITED STATES AT THE MIDDLE OF THE 19TH CENTURY – THE IRISH AND GERMAN WAVE¹

Sorin-Ștefan Maha
„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași
sorin.maha@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article analyses the contribution of the second wave of immigrants to the United States to the formation of the young American people. Unlike other states, the USA is a nation founded on waves of immigrants coming from different parts of the world. This paper includes the second wave of immigrants in US history in the four waves and presents the migration of the Irish and Germans to the USA at the middle of the 19th century. They had an important contribution to the increase of American population and were a source of consumption and workforce for agriculture and various industries.*

Key words: immigration, Irish immigrants, German immigrants, potato crisis

JEL Classification: J11, N31, N33

“*We are a nation of immigrants!*” is a common syntagm in the discourses of American politicians, taken over by mass media and the public and often forgotten, but always in the pipeline, especially when the matter of immigration becomes important again as a justification for the supporters of this phenomenon (Weisberger, 1994). Considered by some to be a cliché, the syntagm incorporates a simple, profound and undeniable truth, i.e. that the USA is a nation with a short history which is based on various waves of immigrants that came from all over the world. Unlike other parts of the Globe, the colonization of the American continent was not carried out chaotically, as the waves of immigrants flew continuously and in a calculated manner, each of them regarding America as “The Promised Land”.

With respect to the various waves of immigrants that populated the American land along history, we can identify four significant periods, each of them being defined by distinctive features.

- “The first wave” of immigrants goes back to the colonial period and is considered to have started at the beginning of the 17th century, when England was trying to establish a series of colonies on the Eastern shore of America in search of new markets for their products.

¹ ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This work was supported by the European Social Fund in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectorial Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013 [grant POSDRU/88/1.5/S/47646].

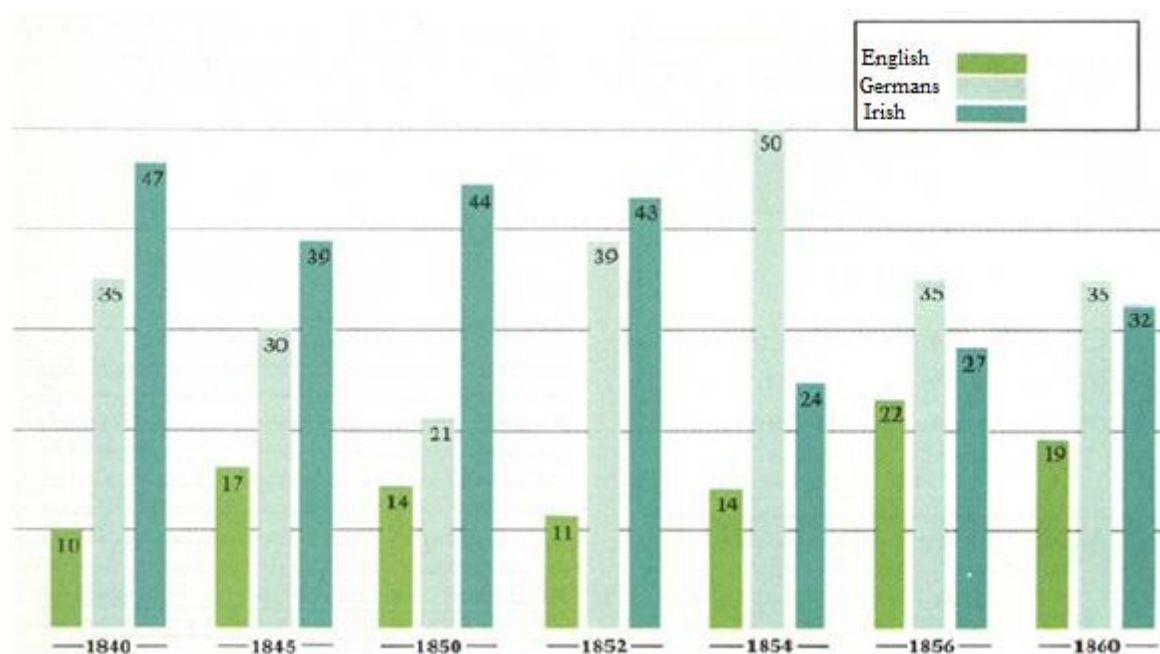
- “The second wave” starts in 1815, when Ireland prevailed over England as the main immigrant supplier to the USA. Drawn to the American land for various reasons, especially financial ones, Irish and German immigrants are the main feature of the immigrant flows in the second wave.
- “The third wave” of immigrants in the USA starts in the eight decade of the 19th century as it overlaps World War One and ends with “the Great Depression” of 1929-1933. This wave is characterized as the greatest transatlantic movement of persons in history, with over 14 million Europeans crossing the USA borders between 1860 and 1900, followed by other 18.6 million until the crisis of ’29-’33. (Bryant, 1999)
- “The fourth wave” of immigrants starts in 1965, along with the change of the USA Immigration Law when, for the first time, the Mexican families which had become American citizens with full powers in time, were allowed to immigrate in the USA for the purpose of reunification.

The second great wave of immigrants which flooded the USA contributed to an unprecedented increase of the American population from 4 million only in 1790 to 32 million seven decades later, in 1860. Since 1820, Ireland had become the main immigrant supplier to the USA, outdistancing England in this respect, the latter being also defeated by Germany until 1850.

Most Irish immigrants which came to the USA were driven by the “potato crisis of 1845” which generated the *Great Irish Famine* at the middle of the 19th century – a hard moment in the history of this state which definitely changed the demography, politics and cultural landscape of Ireland. For the Irish struck by the cruelest famine in history, the immigration to America was their only hope. Once they reached the USA, the Irish settled in ports or near big cities, working to pay for food or shelter. Therefore the migration of the first Irish is also known in the literature of the field as “the beggars’ migration”.

As can be seen from the chart below, at the end of the 19th century, the main countries which supplied immigrants to the USA were the following, according to their importance: Ireland, Germany and England. However, the share of the three was overwhelming so, in 1840, they held together 92% of the total number of immigrants that reached the American land; among them, the Irish alone held 47% of the total number, whereas the Germans more than a third. In the decade that follows the *potato crisis* in Ireland, the tendency remains the same, i.e. the hierarchy of main countries supplying immigrants to the USA does not change in share.

Figure 1 - The share of English, German and Irish immigration within the total number of immigrants at the middle of 19th century

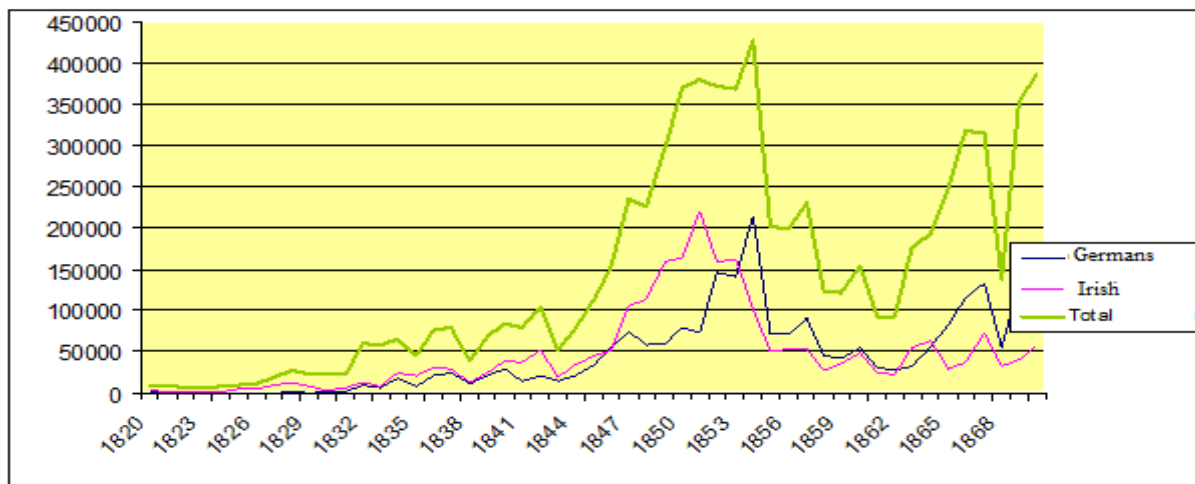


Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial Edition*, Washington D.C., 1975 at <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/ellis-island/immigration-1840-60.jpg>

In 1854 Germany became the country which sent the largest number of immigrants to America, outdistancing Ireland, for the first time. Half of the persons that reached American land in that year were Germans. Although their share within the total of USA immigrants would decrease in the following two decades, the Germans would remain the main supplying nation until the end of the second wave.

The evolution of English and Irish immigrants followed the same trend as the total of immigration, with a continuous growth until the half of the '50s, being followed by a decline in the following decade. As can be seen from the figure below, the share of the two nations decreased in time, as a result of the reconstruction of European economies (and especially the Irish one), and the occurrence of other nations issuing immigrant flows from areas such as Central and South Eastern Europe, Mexico and China.

Figure 2 - The evolution of the second “wave” of immigrants to the USA (1820 – 1870)



Source: *The Dillingham Commission Reports*, vol. 3, pp. 66-82;

The Germans could be distinguished from the Irish, the peoples that had the biggest share in the immigration to the USA at the middle of the 19th century, by their social class and financial situation. As compared to the Irish, most of the Germans were political refugees, scholars, intellectuals, some of them wealthy and eager to later invest their money in the cheap lands of the Western US states. They founded towns that survived till this day such as New Ulm in Minnesota or New Braunfels in Texas (Weisberger, 1994). In time, the German farmers spread in the central states of America, as well (Illionois, Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin). Some of them became “Texans”, which explains the 1843 German edition of the Texas Laws. In cities such as New York, New Orleans or Saint Louis, German breweries, book cover shops, butcheries and other similar industries become renowned. Over 100 000 Germans lived in New York in 1860 in the so called *Little Germany* or *Kleinedeutschland*, an area formed by many neighbourhoods which hosted no less than 25 German Catholic churches, 50 German schools, other 10 bookshops and 5 publishing houses for German books. For the Americans that witnessed the mass migration of the Germans and Irish, the German minority was a model to follow, unlike the Irish one which had been considered a problem for a long time. The hostile attitude of the common American, of the mass media and the political class towards Irish immigrants would change in time, along with the penetration of other peoples, from Eastern Europe, to the following wave of immigrants.

Apart from the two major groups, the immigrants with a significant share in the second wave of immigrants to the USA were the Nordic peoples: the Danes, the Norwegians and the Swedes which arrived to the USA and grew constantly in numbers since 1850.

The massive immigration to the USA and consequently, the creation of a larger and larger market for consumption, the rich sources of raw matters that the American nation disposed of, the foundation of the first factories and manufacturers, as well as the entrepreneurial spirit of middle class Americans of the middle of 19th century created the premises for a rapid industrialization of the country. Due to the fact that European immigrants mainly devoted themselves to agriculture and the occupation of virgin lands from the West, the lack of qualified workforce for industry largely stimulated the introduction of machinery and the most advanced technique for that period.

Considered as a rare resource from the beginning, the work of immigrants employed in industry was well remunerated, the continuous flow² of European immigrants of the following decades had the natural impact of decreasing real incomes; however, despite this, they were still higher than the European incomes. The lowest salaries were those of the immigrants working in the construction of channels and railways, i.e. 8-10 dollars per month. However, this amount was not a modest one for a Swedish immigrant who, in his country of origin was paid with 33.5 dollars per annum, if working in agriculture (Weisberger, 1994).

THE KNOW-NOTHING MOVEMENT

Unlike the first English colonialists who, once they arrived on the North American continent, regarded nature and the natives as their enemies, the Irish new comers at the beginning of the 19th century were facing a well-formed American society. For a long time, the Irish were confronted with the Americans' hostility, something that would also hold true for the reaction to the following "waves" of immigrants, as well.

Once a new wave of immigrants reached the land of the newly formed state, the ones in the previous wave were mandatorily becoming "Americans" and the new comers were trying to imitate the former (Stan, 2001, p. 17). The Irish immigrants were not welcomed by the American population who strongly felt threatened by them. Therefore the Irish had to accept the hardest and lowest paid jobs, living in inhumane conditions, were persecuted and despised by the xenophobes in America (Vianu, 1973, p. 65). The fear of the unknown is a feature of the human being, as well as the reluctance to strangers; the lack of trust in the new waves of immigrants, the Irish one included,

² Except for the periods that immediately followed the crises of 1837 and 1857, the number of immigrants on USA land unceasingly increased.

is justified. Similarly, the Irish who had become “Americans” in the meantime would also stand against the waves to come (Kennedy, 1963).

Soon afterwards most of the stores in Boston and New York started to post discriminating adverts which addressed the new immigrants - “*No Irish Need Apply*”; moreover, other organizations, mainly formed by protestants, were fighting against Catholic immigrants (Irish and Germans) that, in their opinion, were a threat both to the available jobs and their religious conviction (Kennedy, 1963). One of these organizations is the one called *Know-Nothing* which was against the Irish and German immigrants in the USA. The group formed by Protestants was to become the first political party in USA history which fought against Catholic immigrants. The Irish immigrants were mainly accused for not living a life as good as they would afford it due to their religious fanaticism. The protestant opponents claimed that the Catholic religion was always a mean to accuse and fight against one’s obtaining profit (Weisberger, 1994). Among the claims of this party, the following are worth mentioning: limiting the access to the USA of the immigrants coming from traditional Catholic countries, especially Ireland and Germany, the interdiction to use another language than English on US territory, as well as the requirement, for any immigrant, to have spent at least 21 years on US territory to obtain American citizenship. As no party whose doctrine is based on bigotry and hate lives a long life in the USA, *Know-Nothing* would disappear at the middle of the 19th century, despite its fresh start.

CONCLUSIONS

USA remain a nation which was founded, along time, on different waves of immigrants coming from various parts of the world. By analyzing the economic, political and social history of the USA, we can reach the conclusion that immigrants had a leading role in the country’s formation as nation, contributed to its industrial development at the beginning of the 20th century and helped it to become the strongest world power.

The “second wave” of immigrants lasts five decades when, between 1815 and 1870, 3.5 million European immigrants, mainly Irish and German, come to the USA, most of them driven by the famine in the European countries at that time. They had a major contribution to the foundation of the American nation, setting up cities, working in agriculture and in the most important industries.

This wave of immigrants is only a sample of what would later mean the immigration phenomenon for this state, i.e. in the following decades up to World War One, both in terms of numbers and heterogeneity of supplying nations.

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