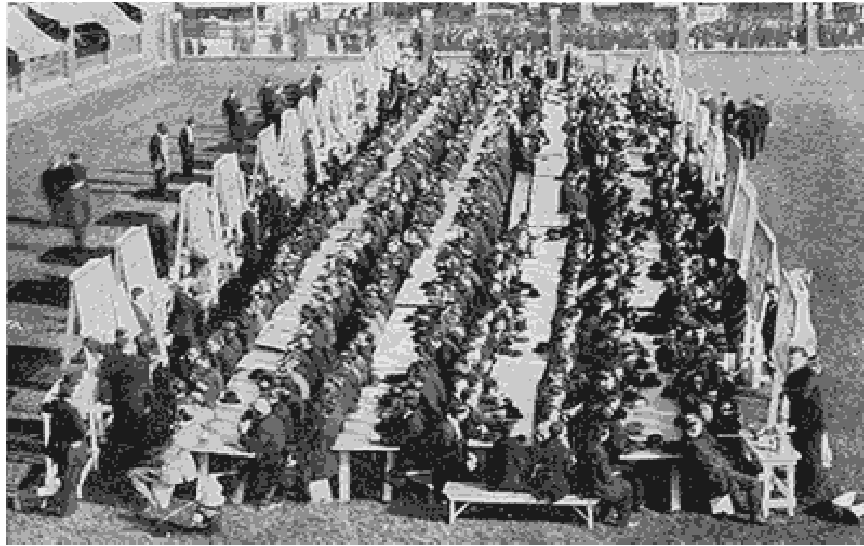


“Americanization” of Immigrants



English language classes at Ford Motor Company, 1919. Ford was one of the first employers to institute a corporate Americanization program.

Community Americanization: A Handbook for Workers, 1920

The "Americanization" of immigrants during the early 1900s could be depicted as the "softer" side in the "clash of cultures." Rather than exclude immigrants, Americanization programs sought to integrate and assimilate aliens by teaching them English and by instructing them in the workings of American democracy. Nativists believed that classes in American history, politics, and culture would enhance the socialization process, instill middle-class values, and wean newcomers away from their immigrant heritage by making them "one of us."

Americanization, typical of progressive reforms, combined public and private efforts. Beginning in 1915, a number of public schools and private organizations in various states and localities created programs to teach English and assimilate millions of "new" immigrants, thereby mitigating the "clash of cultures." The foreign-born comprised more than ten percent of the population in 26 states; in nine states over 100,000 aliens could not speak English.

During the First World War, the Council of National Defense solicited the aid of private organizations such as the National Americanization Committee. The Council also directed the United States Bureau of Education to develop a national policy to create conformity and win the loyalty of the foreign-born, since nearly a third of resident aliens had been born in Germany or one of its allies. In addition to defusing the threat of spying and sedition by those harboring pro-German sympathies, the Council of National Defense also believed that workers ignorant and unable to understand instructions in English posed a danger in munitions factories and other vital industries. Americanization would help reduce workplace accidents and expedite the war effort.

The State Department published pamphlets for teachers and community leaders suggesting ways to publicize education programs for foreign-born adults. The department also

produced a film, "The Making of an American," which stimulated public interest. The State Department also conducted training courses for teachers in areas populated by large immigrant communities.

Furthermore, when the U.S. entered the Great War in 1917, Army examiners discovered that about one-fourth of foreign-born draftees were functionally illiterate. This finding served the purposes of those on both sides of the immigration issue and illustrates alternative ways Americans responded to the "clash of cultures." On one hand, the low IQ scores of southern and eastern Europeans, which probably stemmed from linguistic problems, seemed to prove they belonged to "inferior" stock, which supported proponents of restriction. On the other hand, the scores demonstrated that, with proper education and guidance, immigrants were capable of filling occupations suitable to their talents and abilities, a notion which supported the defenders of assimilation. In any event, the military itself became an agent of Americanization: enlistment conferred citizenship and created loyalty. The foreign-born, it turns out, comprised one in five American soldiers during the war.



Immigrant women in Americanization program, Library of Congress

Between 1915 and 1919 the United States Bureau of Education had assisted the education of immigrants, but discontinued the program after the war due to budgetary retrenchment. Thereafter, the National Education Association (NEA) continued the effort by establishing a Department of Immigrant Education, which eventually became the Division of Adult Education. Thus the Americanization movement of the early 20th century, created to reduce the tensions aroused by the "clash of cultures," became the forerunner of adult education in the United States.

Source:

http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/mmh/clash/Imm_KKK/Immigration%20Pages/Subnarratives/Americanization.htm