

The Roaring 20s: A Nervous Generation

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The changes of the “Roaring 20” manifested in a number of ways. New forms of consumption and expression indicated that a “new generation” had arrived in American cities. Harlem and other urban areas experienced a renaissance of Black music, literature, and political activism. However, some intellectuals—and White, rural Protestants—responded to the changes differently. Their actions indicated that a “lost generation” and a “nervous generation” had also arrived, along with the “new generation.”

This tutorial examines the 1920s, from the perspectives of the “lost” and “nervous” generation, in five parts:

1. A Lost Generation

The 1920s were a time of dramatic change in the United States. Some artists and intellectuals reacted by expressing their disillusionment with American society. Known as the **Lost Generation**, writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Edith Wharton, and John Dos Passos conveyed their hopelessness and despair by criticizing both the “new generation” and the conservative reactions to the changes of the 1920s. The Lost Generation was alienated by World War I and the events of 1919, particularly the **Red Scare**: the pervasive fear that communism and other radical ideas were infiltrating the United States.



TERMS TO KNOW

Lost Generation

A group of writers who came of age during World War I and expressed their disillusionment with the era.

Red Scare

Fear of communist infiltration and other forms of radicalism in the United States following World War I; led Americans to restrict and discriminate against any form of radical dissent.

Many of these artists, authors, and intellectuals expressed their alienation by criticizing American society. A number of them moved to Paris, Rome, or Berlin to live as “expatriates.”



DID YOU KNOW

An expatriate is someone who lives outside their home country.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (pictured right), one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, captured the mood of the Lost Generation. His debut novel, *This Side of Paradise*, portrays a generation “grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faith in man shaken.” In *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, millionaire Jay Gatsby lives an unscrupulous, profligate life while loving another man’s wife.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Member of the “Lost Generation” of American authors who expressed their disillusionment with America in the 1920s; author of *The Great Gatsby*.

Writer **Ernest Hemingway** (pictured below) lived a nomadic and adventurous life in Europe, Cuba, and Africa.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Ernest Hemingway

American novelist and member of the “Lost Generation,” who left the United States in the 1920s and wrote about his experiences as an ambulance driver in World War I.



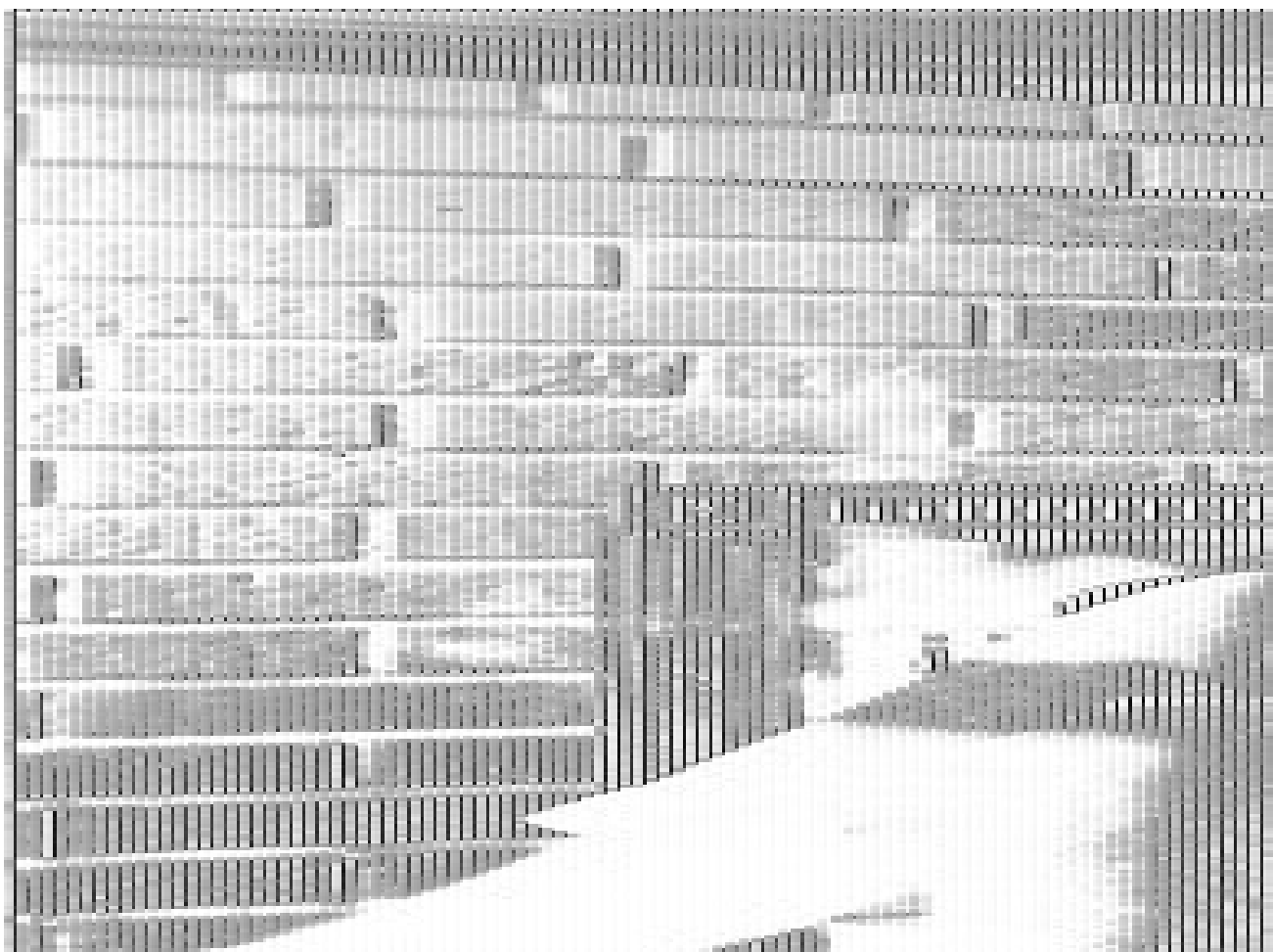
DID YOU KNOW

Hemingway was an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I, and he worked as a journalist in Spain in the 1930s, reporting on the civil war.

Hemingway used his experiences with war and tragedy to great effect. In novels such as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Hemingway depicted characters who were resilient in the face of struggle and failure.



F. Scott Fitzgerald, ca. 1921.



Ernest Hemingway was one of the most prominent members of the Lost Generation. He lived as an expatriate in Europe during the 1920s.

2. A Nervous Generation

While Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and other authors and artists developed characters who epitomized the excesses of the decade or struggled against them, more Americans turned inward and venerated traditional values. Rural Americans, who were predominantly White and Protestant, responded to the rapid changes occurring in urban America by rejecting diversity and defending their religious values. In doing so, they were part of a group that historian Roderick Nash referred to as the “**nervous generation**.”



TERM TO KNOW

Nervous Generation

Americans who rejected the changes of the 1920s and turned to traditional customs and values. While members of the “new generation” embraced new hairstyles and listened to jazz and members of the Lost Generation expressed their disillusionment and cynicism, the “nervous generation” venerated conservative values. Ironically, they used some of the new technologies and mediums of the 1920s, including advertising and radio, to promote their beliefs. They were also willing to use governmental power to suppress dissenting views.

3. Nativism

Fear and anxiety over immigration and radicalism did not end with the Red Scare of 1919; they continued throughout the following decade. They were reinforced by some prominent legal cases and the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan.

The concerns of the “nervous generation” were evident during the trial of **Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti**. Sacco and Vanzetti were Italian immigrants who were accused of robbery and murder in Braintree, Massachusetts (south of Boston), in April 1920. No direct evidence linked them to the crime. When Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested in May of 1920, they assumed it was because they were immigrants affiliated with the **anarchist** movement.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti

Italian immigrants affiliated with the anarchist movement who were arrested and executed for carrying out a robbery and murder in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1920, despite the lack of evidence linking them to the crime.



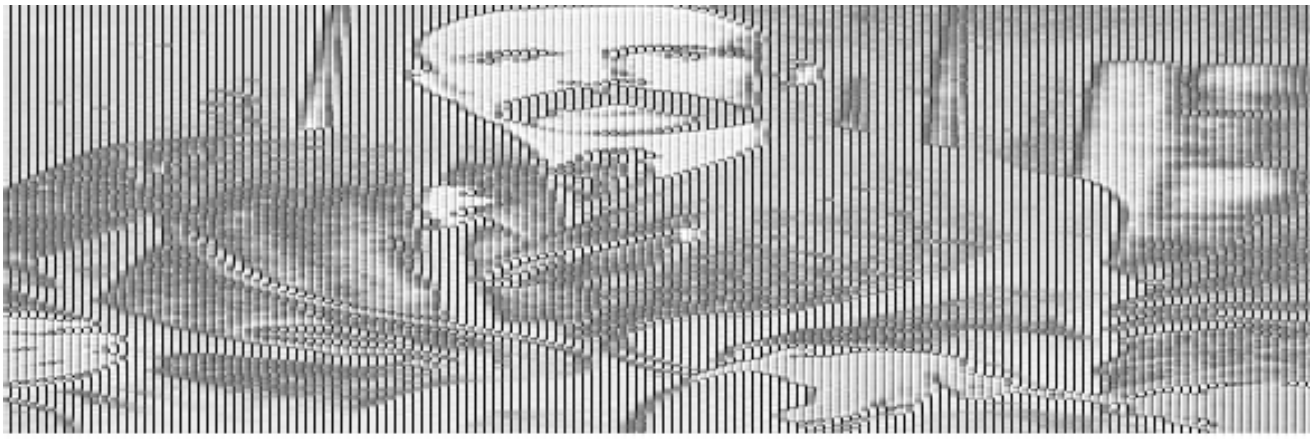
TERM TO KNOW

Anarchism

A radical political philosophy that rejects centralized government and advocates the creation of societies based on voluntary associations.

Anarchists favored the destruction of capitalist society through violence if necessary. Sacco and Vanzetti were active in the anarchist movement and knew several individuals who were arrested and deported during the Palmer Raids of 1919.

During the trial, prosecutors introduced circumstantial evidence (e.g., Sacco and Vanzetti were armed when they were arrested) to imply their guilt. The prosecution also highlighted the radical political views of both men and the immigrant community to which they belonged. On July 14, 1921, the jury found Sacco and Vanzetti guilty of robbery and murder.



(a)

Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco (a) sit in handcuffs at Dedham Superior Court in Massachusetts in 1923. After the verdict in 1921, protesters demonstrated (b) in London, England, hoping to save Sacco and Vanzetti from execution.

Opinions on Sacco and Vanzetti's trial and judgment were divided along ethnic lines, with immigrants claiming that the condemned pair was innocent.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The verdict sparked protests from Italian and other immigrant groups.

A number of authors and intellectuals in the United States and abroad also criticized the verdict. Protests in support of Sacco and Vanzetti took place around the world, from Tokyo to Buenos Aires to London.

Harvard Law School Professor Felix Frankfurter was among the most articulate critics of the trial. In 1927, he wrote in *The Atlantic* that “By systematic exploitation of the defendants’ alien blood, their imperfect knowledge of English, their unpopular social views, and their opposition to the [First World War], the District Attorney invoked against [Sacco and Vanzetti] a riot of political passion and patriotic sentiment; and the trial judge connived at—one had almost written, cooperated in—the process.”



DID YOU KNOW

Frankfurter was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1939. Despite subsequent motions and appeals based on ballistics testing, recanted testimony, and an ex-convict's confession, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed on August 23, 1927.

Additional Resource

Watch a short video clip from [Famous Trials](#) to learn more about Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

The belief that White, Protestant Americans were being attacked by undesirable people (including immigrants) and ideas contributed to the emergence of the **Second Ku Klux Klan**.



TERM TO KNOW

Second Ku Klux Klan

A nationwide movement that promoted racism, nativism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Catholicism during the 1920s.

Unlike the first Ku Klux Klan, which covertly terrorized African Americans and their White allies during Reconstruction, the second Klan was a nationwide movement that operated openly.

Months after the release of the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, which portrayed White Southerners as the victims of Reconstruction and celebrated the role of the Ku Klux Klan, William Simmons declared the Klan's second incarnation. The new Klan publicly rejected violence and received support from many mainstream Americans for its embrace of Protestantism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-Semitism and its appeals for a stricter immigration policy.

DID YOU KNOW

The second Klan included many women; chapters of its women's auxiliary were located throughout the country. Along with other activities, these groups advocated for Prohibition and distributed Bibles at public schools.

By 1924, the Second Ku Klux Klan had 6 million members in the United States, primarily in the West, Midwest, and South.



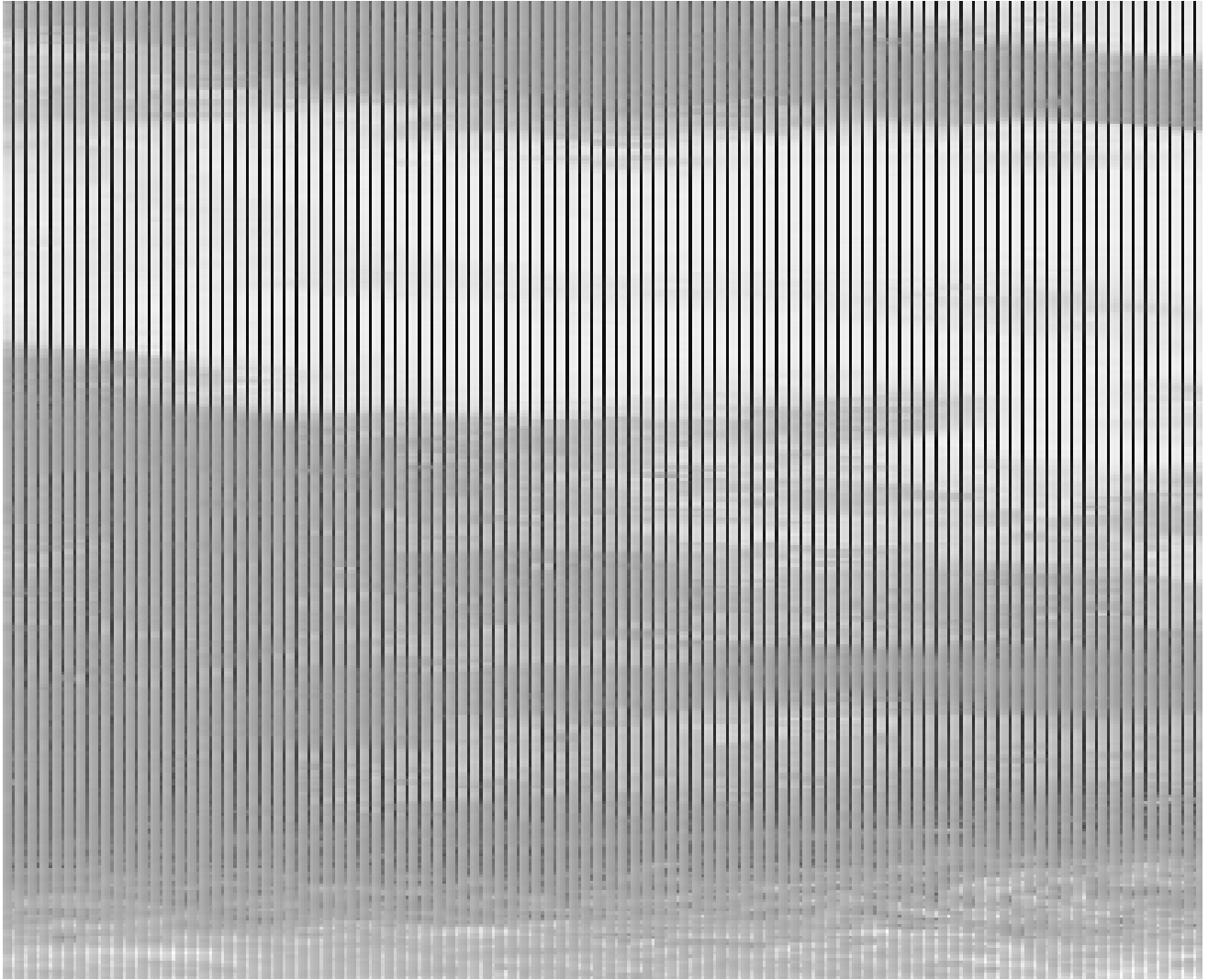
Female members of the Ku Klux Klan march down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC, in 1928. Note the dome of the U.S. Capitol in the background.

To emphasize the organization's influence, the Klan routinely organized marches in Washington, DC, throughout the 1920s. Klan members dominated politics in the South as well as in other states, including



A Ku Klux Klan parade in Washington, DC, in September 1926.

Although the Klan abstained from violence, it continued to use intimidation and terrorism against its victims. These activities included the burning of crosses and public denunciations of Catholics, Jews, and immigrants.

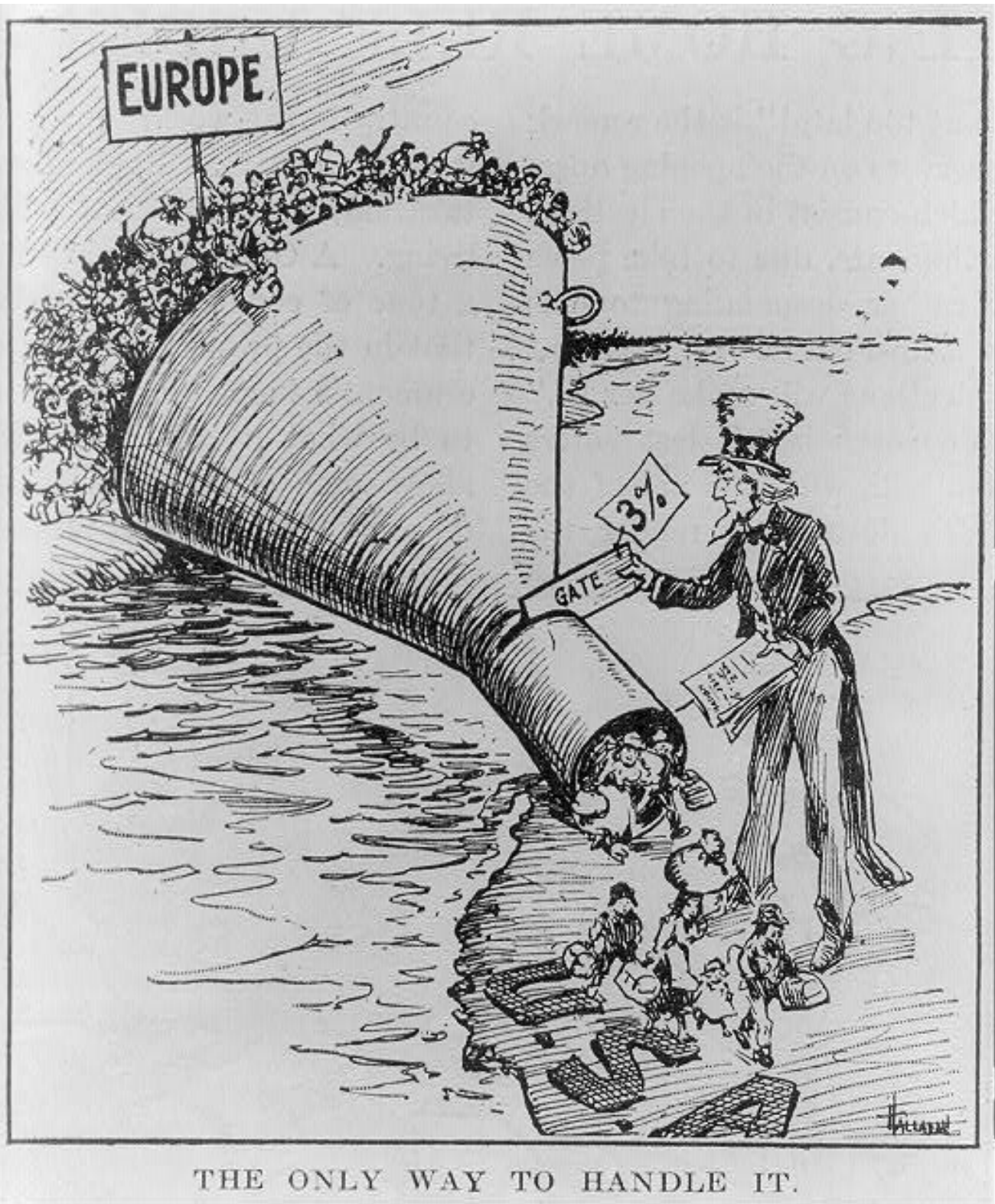


This 1921 photograph from the *Denver News* shows three members of the Ku Klux Klan (two women and one man) standing in front of a burning cross.

4. Immigration Restriction

The Sacco and Vanzetti case and the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan occurred simultaneously with government efforts to restrict immigration.

To “preserve the ideal of American homogeneity,” the Emergency Immigration Act of 1921 applied numerical limits—quotas—to European immigration for the first time. Annual immigration from any country was limited to 3% of the number of U.S. residents from that country, as calculated by the 1910 Census.



A popular political cartoon from 1921 depicts the quota system implemented by the Emergency Immigration Act. As hordes of European immigrants wait for the opportunity to migrate to the United States, Uncle Sam uses the quota system (shown as a funnel) to allow only a few into the United States.



THINK ABOUT IT

Consider the information on nativism and the Second Ku Klux Klan provided above. Which of their principles made the quota system appear to be “the only way” to regulate immigration to the United

States?

The National Origins Act of 1924 went further, lowering the quotas to 2% of the 1890 Census. It significantly reduced the number of Southern and Eastern Europeans eligible for immigration, since immigrants from those areas had only begun to arrive in the United States in large numbers during the 1890s. The act gave preference to skilled workers and relatives of U.S. citizens and excluded Japanese and Chinese immigrants. It placed no limit on immigration from Mexico and other Latin American nations to satisfy the demands of Southwestern farmers who depended on migrant labor.



DID YOU KNOW

When President Coolidge signed the National Origins Act into law, he declared, “America must be kept American.”



MAKE THE CONNECTION

Among the notable legacies of the National Origins Act was the enforcement organization it created: the U.S. Border Patrol. The act charged the Border Patrol with policing U.S. borders and empowered its officers to arrest and deport “illegal aliens,” those who entered the country in violation of immigration laws.

5. Faith, Fundamentalism, and Science

Members of the “nervous generation” participated in a religious resurgence during the 1920s, particularly a resurgence of Protestant fundamentalism and evangelicalism. One element of fundamentalism—the belief that the Bible is the word of God and, therefore, infallible—prompted debate over the roles of science and religion in society. One of the most well-known instances of this debate was the **Scopes Monkey Trial** of 1925.



TERM TO KNOW

Scopes Monkey Trial

The trial of John T. Scopes for teaching evolution in a public school in Tennessee.

Charles Darwin published his theory of natural selection in 1859. By the 1920s, many of the standard science textbooks used in the United States included information about evolution. Protestant fundamentalists targeted the teaching of evolution as an example of what was wrong with American society. During the 1920s, fundamentalist groups supported legislation in several states that prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The anti-evolution law in Tennessee (the Butler Act) made it illegal “to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.”

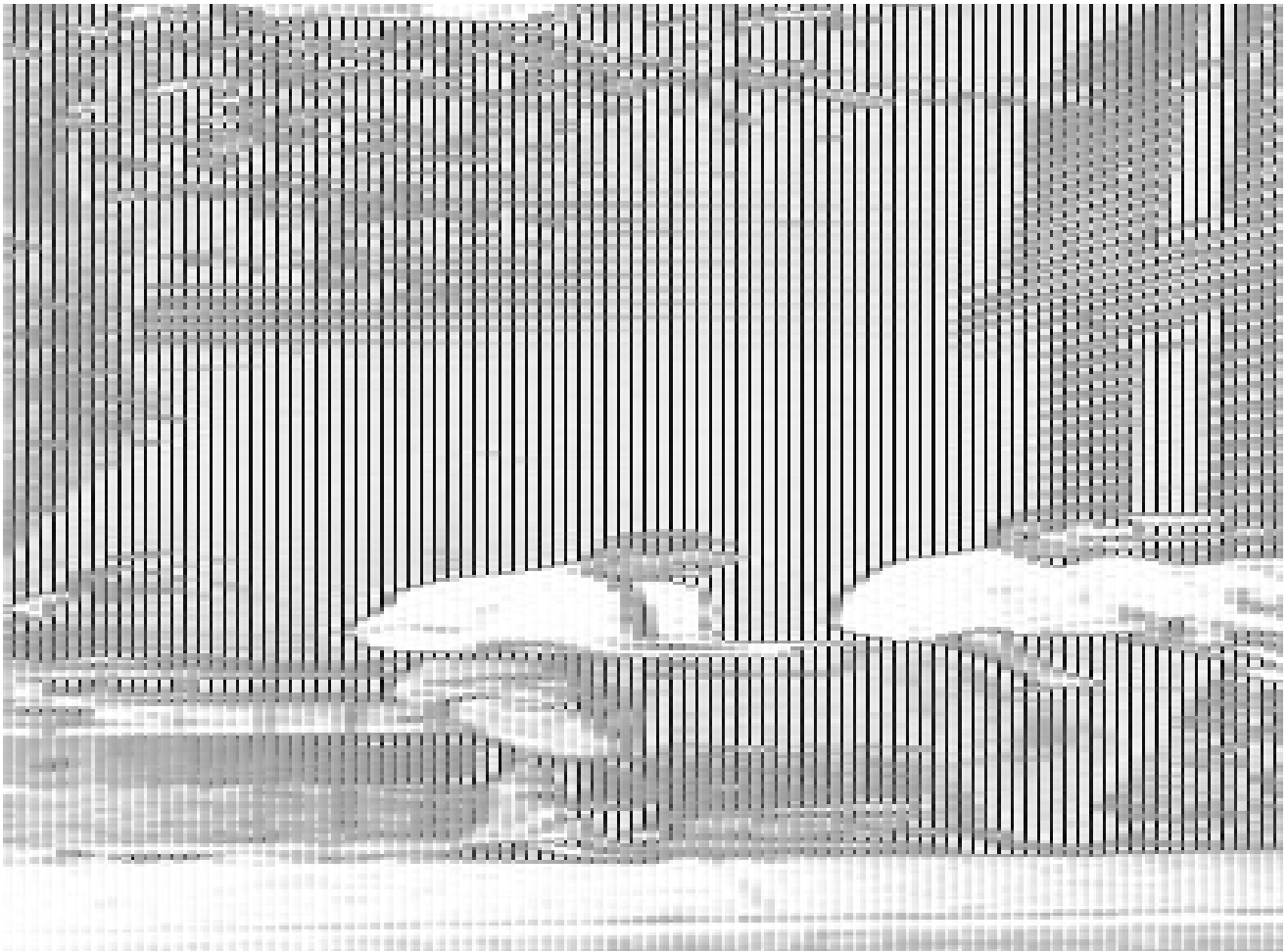
To challenge the Butler Act, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and town leaders in Dayton, Tennessee (eager for an opportunity to promote their town), enlisted **John T. Scopes**, who indicated that he may have taught evolution while substituting for another biology teacher. Fundamentalist groups (as well as the newspapers) learned of Scopes’s admission and descended upon Dayton. A carnival-like atmosphere was created around his trial, highlighting divisions between the “new generation,” which claimed to defend independent thought and free inquiry, and the “nervous generation,” which sought to reinforce traditional beliefs.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John T. Scopes

Biology teacher in Tennessee who was at the center of the controversy in the 1920s over teaching evolution in classrooms.



During the Scopes Monkey Trial, supporters of the Butler Act read literature at the headquarters of the Anti-Evolution League in Dayton, Tennessee.

William Jennings Bryan, the former presidential candidate who had become a champion of Protestant fundamentalism, prosecuted the case. Clarence Darrow, a prominent lawyer and outspoken agnostic, represented the defense. The high point of the trial came when Darrow called on Bryan as an expert witness on the Bible. Knowing Bryan's fundamentalist faith in the literal truth of the Bible, Darrow peppered him with questions designed to ridicule his beliefs and highlight his ignorance of modern science.

Darrow's questioning of Bryan illustrated the divisions between urban and rural America, between faith and science, between fundamentalism and secularism, and between the "new" and "nervous" generations. Those who supported the teaching of evolution saw Bryan's testimony as foolish and indicative of backward religious beliefs. Many Protestants saw Darrow's actions as an attack on the Bible and their faith.



DID YOU KNOW

Scopes was found guilty of violating the Butler Act. The judge fined him \$100. However, the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the verdict on a technicality.



SUMMARY

The 1920s were the era of the “Lost Generation” and the “nervous generation” as well as the “new generation.” Authors associated with the Lost Generation expressed disillusion with modern society, but a larger number of Americans reacted to the changes that followed World War I by turning inward and celebrating traditional values. Some members of the “nervous generation” reacted more negatively than others, as shown by the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the passage of restrictive immigration laws. The Sacco and Vanzetti and Scopes trials highlighted divisions over immigration, radicalism, science, and religion in American society.

Source: This tutorial curated and/or authored by Matthew Pearce, Ph.D with content adapted from Openstax “U.S. History”. access for free at openstax.org/details/books/us-history LICENSE: **CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0 INTERNATIONAL**



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [“The Only Way to Handle It” \(1926\)](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Female Ku Klux Klan members march down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. \(1928\)](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Ku Klux Klan march in Washington, DC \(1926\)](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Image of F. Scott Fitzgerald \(ca. 1921\)](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Anarchism

A radical political philosophy that rejects centralized government and advocates the creation of societies based on voluntary associations.

Lost Generation

A group of writers who came of age during World War I and expressed their disillusionment with the era.

Nervous Generation

Americans who rejected the changes of the 1920s and turned to traditional customs and values.

Red Scare

Fear of communist infiltration and other forms of radicalism in the United States following World War I; led Americans to restrict and discriminate against any form of radical dissent.

Scopes Monkey Trial

The trial of John T. Scopes for teaching evolution in a public school in Tennessee.

Second Ku Klux Klan

A nationwide movement that expressed racism, nativism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Catholicism during the 1920s.

**Ernest Hemingway**

American novelist and member of the “Lost Generation,” who left the United States in the 1920s and wrote about his experiences as an ambulance driver in World War I.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Member of the “Lost Generation” of American authors who expressed their disillusionment with America in the 1920s; author of *The Great Gatsby*.

John T. Scopes

Biology teacher in Tennessee who was at the center of the controversy in the 1920s over teaching evolution in classrooms.

Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti

Italian immigrants affiliated with the anarchist movement who were arrested and executed for carrying out a robbery and murder in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1920, despite the lack of evidence linking them to the crime.