Ellis Island: Gatekeeper of the "Undesirables"

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Following World War I, America experienced an influx of immigrants from war torn nations across Southern and Eastern Europe. However, due to post-war xenophobic sentiments, these "new immigrants" were determined to be highly undesirable for American society. The government and citizenry alike began to fear the effect these public charges would have on greater American society, and assimilation began to become favored over diversity. What was formerly the nation of a "melting pot" mentality became one that feared a lack of conformity. Through both government influence and citizens' own prejudices, these national ideals manifested on Ellis Island itself. The overall result was increased medical detainments of the new immigrants without cause, as one's potential in society had become intrinsically linked to medical health. Overcrowding due to these erroneous detainments led to unsanitary conditions, food shortages, and poor treatment of immigrants. Many of these immigrants documented a frightening, unjust experience, while medical records and commissioner memoirs confirm the unfair detainments and misguided treatments. Looking at both first person accounts and published works, this article analyzes how the immigrant experience on Ellis Island from 1910-1940 was affected by changing American sentiments at large, as well as other existing factors such as race, gender, and ability.

> *"One can imagine the frustration of those who reach the grim red buildings of Ellis Island and view the farther shore which they will never be allowed to visit. They are confined behind barred windows in the very shadow of the Statue of Liberty."*[1]

For decades, Ellis Island served as the immigration center of America, processing hundreds of thousands of newcomers in search of the American dream. However, during the first half of the twentieth century, America's sentiments

1 Edward Corsi, *In the Shadow of Liberty* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), 103.

towards immigrant groups changed dramatically, and a fear of the "new immigrants" emerged.[2] The primary concern was that immigrants would become a public charge on society, and collectively degrade the quality of American life.[3] They were viewed as socially contagious, and the focus on preserving the American social ideal became a paramount concern among immigration officials and the government.[4] This belief that unrestricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe was a new threat to social order became the foundation of restrictionist ideals and fuelled the widespread judgment of immigrants, which ultimately affected their treatment on Ellis Island. Once on the island, certain immigrant stigmas were linked to other factors such as race, health, and ability, and ultimately determined if an immigrant was to be held.[5] This link between social and physical health proved especially relevant in immigrant detainments, and medical diagnoses were commonly used to promote restrictionist policies and further immigrant prejudices.[6] This assumed connection between medical health and social potential created a paradox that dominated the ideologies of the time. Americans feared that certain immigrants would threaten their culture and infused that fear into all aspects of the inspection process on Ellis Island.[7] This resulted in Ellis Island medical inspectors arbitrarily creating the conditions they feared based on misguided social concepts of race and ability. This attempted exclusion of the "undesirable" populations deemed harmful to the American ideal led to poor conditions, inaccurate medical inspections, and a pervasive sense of fear and confusion on the island.[8] Thus, the Ellis Island that was seen as a "beacon of hope" to some became the "Island of Heartbreak" to others.[9]

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2 Desmond S. King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 73-74. "New Immigrants," however, is used in multiple publications of the time and was the term typically used to describe immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe during the interwar years.

3 Alan M. Kraut, "Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and American Efficiency, 1890-1924," *Social Science History* (1988): 385.

4 King, *Making Americans*, 168-170.

5 Richard J. Connors, *review of Xenophobia and Immigration*, 1820-1930 by Thomas J. Curran, International Migration Review (1976): 298.

6 Kraut, "Silent Travelers," 384.

7 Connors, *review of Xenophobia and Immigration*, 257.

8 Corsi, *In the Shadow, 101*. This term referred to the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as well, deemed harmful to American society for a number of reasons.The term is widely used in modern anlyses as well as first hand accounts (such as this one).

9 Roxana Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity: Disability, Medical Inspection, and Public Health Regulations on Ellis Island," *Cultural Critique* (2009): 137.

Since opening as America's largest immigration port in 1892, Ellis Island processed thousands of immigrants of various national origins on a daily basis. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of these immigrants came from northern and western Europe. The arrival of the first immigrant at Ellis Island, Annie Moore,[10] was celebrated nationally and the gift to her of a gold coin signified the hope a life in America brought to immigrants.[11]

This image of immigration was short lived, however. By the beginning of the twentieth century, an influx of "new" immigrants arrived, and by 1907 the American government considered it a national problem.[12] Following the government's fear, American sentiments toward immigrants also changed drastically. The new immigrants were seen as a "public charge" to society, and treatment and conditions on the island were altered as a result.[13]

After surviving a brutal passage to America, immigrants were immediately judged based on their race, origin, class, and health upon arrival. This led to an overall climate of fear and confusion on the island.[14] A young girl who arrived on the island in 1920, Phyllis Spinney, described the heightened chaos greeting immigrants on the island: "The noise, all the tongues and the languages, everybody was yelling, scared, frightened. They didn't know what to do, what awaited them."[15] As she was arriving from Southern Europe, she experienced the prejudicial procedures on Ellis Island first-hand.

Not only was there a heightened language and cultural barrier, but immigrants were also frequently stopped and questioned if an inspector believed them to be of a particular race.[16] This was largely due to the belief that the new immi-

10 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 17; Annie Moore was a fifteen year old Irish girl who arrived on Ellis Island in 1892 with her two brothers. She was instantly passed and handed a gold coin worth ten dollars.

11 Ibid., 95.

12 Ibid., 151; also noted in Alan M. Kraut, "Silent Travelers," 385.

13 Howard Markel Stern and Alexandra Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs: The Persistent Association of Immigrants and Disease in American Society," *The Milbank Quarterly* (2002): 764.

14 Linnea Hallgren, interview by Janet Levine, July 4, 1995, *North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories*, accessed March 12, 2015, http://solomon.imld.alexanderstreet.com.

15 Phyllis Spinney, interview by Janet Levine, *North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories,* accessed March 12, 2015, http://solomon.imld.alexanderstreet.com.

16 E. H. Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants: Administration and Line Inspection at Ellis Island," *Public Health Reports* (1896-1970) (May 1917): 738.

grants were of poorer stock than the old, and that they could degrade the quality of American society.[17] However, it was not only the new immigrants who were affected by the restrictionist practices.[18] A few years before, another young girl, Linea Hallgren, arrived on the island in 1915 from Sweden. She also admitted to the overall "confusion and shock of being there" as well as her "being treated roughly" once she and her family arrived.[19] Despite having come from Sweden, her status as an old immigrant, and her already possessing a relative in America, Ellis Island is still described as frightening and overwhelming.[20] Despite possessing what would otherwise be considered positive circumstances, she was nonetheless a victim of poor treatment. The similarities in the accounts, despite the varying origins of the immigrants, are largely due to the years of arrival on Ellis Island. This is because by the end of WWI, there was an "exacerbated hostility toward immigrants" across the nation.[21] Although this was most notably directed against the new immigrants arriving from the former Central Powers, the overall atmosphere on the island changed to accommodate this hostility.

This harsh and hardened atmosphere on the island frightened and deterred arriving immigrants. Even Edward Corsi, a former Commissioner of Ellis Island, corroborated this hostile environment and the sheer fear and confusion the immigrants' experienced upon arrival:

> *These crowds, this pushing, this hurrying to get things done, this red tape, those cards containing he knew not what damning information against him – it was not at all like his peaceful life in his native country. Would he get along in this new strange land? Maybe he never should have come. These thoughts must have been in the minds of most of them.*[22]

17 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 761.

18 Thomas J. Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 1820-1930 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), 124. The term restrictionist largely refered to those in America who felt that immigration was harmful to American society, and that it needed to be curbed, or even stopped, to preserve the American quality of life.

19 Hallgren, interview by Janet Levine.

20 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 74-77. A common requirement for many female immigrants was having an existing relative already in the United States, so that they would not become a burden of the state.

21 King, *Making Americans*, 90.

22 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 74.

Despite this commissioner's empathy with the immigrant experience, it was not the norm. Few inspectors on the island noted the increasing prejudice against immigrants, and many were either knowingly or subconsciously influenced by their belief that the "undesirables" would degrade the quality of American society.[23] This led to little change in the restrictionist immigration thought and policy, increased detainments, and degraded conditions on the island.

It was not only the initial environment that affected the immigrants on Ellis Island. Once inside, the physical conditions of the island were just as shocking and the immigration center remained under a constant veil of dirt, grime, and vermin during the busiest immigration years.[24] Although the worst conditions were only fully experienced by the immigrants who were detained for varying amounts of time, the dirty and overcrowded state of the island unnecessarily exacerbated the already trying treatment many detainees were facing. With the first step a young German immigrant, Lily Fenster, took on Ellis Island, she noted "when I seen America first, it was very dirty there."[25] Accounts of cramped quarters from immigrants corroborate increasing number of unnecessary detainments on Ellis Island, which further exacerbated poor conditions. One such account given by Irving Halperin, a 1929 immigrant from Minsk, notes the barriers and small fenced off sections for various immigrant groups,[26] while another commissioner, William Williams, describes storing detainees wherever space was available: "The aliens who were unfortunate enough to be without beds had to sleep on benches, chairs, the floor, or wherever we could put them."[27]

However, this overcrowding was not the worst of the immigrant experiences on Ellis Island. Rather it reflected the racial and ethnic segregation of new immigrants and was a direct result of increasing medical rejection rates.[28] It was these medical examination and rejection processes imposed upon new immigrants that resulted

23 Connors, review of Xenophobia and Immigration, 258.

24 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 78.

25 Lily Fenster, Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive, accessed March 12, 2015, http://solomon.imld.alexanderstreet.com.

26 Irving Halperin, interview by Andrew Phillips, May 24, 1989, *North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories*, accessed March 12, 2015, http://solomon.imld.alexanderstreet.com.

27 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 78.

28 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 764.

in unpleasant and fearful experiences. An immigrant from Russia, Britia Rosendor, who was detained for thirty-eight days on the island during a measles outbreak, experienced the poor environment which resulted from the medical processes: "We didn't have fresh air. And then the tension was great, you know? And there were some problem people. They were, they gave the atmosphere a tension."[29] As both a new immigrant and a detainee for "loathsome and contagious diseases,"[30] her poor physical health was linked to an inability to assimilate into American society,[31] and thus deemed her less worthy of equal or fair treatment.[32]

Due to this link between social and physical health, inaccurate medical detainments were common. Once being denied at initial inspection, many immigrants experienced degrading and unnecessary secondary checks of health. One immigrant, Thomas Iaci, having no reasons for suspicion other than his arrival from Southern Europe shortly after World War I, was debarred at initial inspection for reasons undisclosed to him.[33] He claimed "they [immigration inspectors] made us strip"[34] upon entering the inspection process without explanation. Although this was a common step in the inspection process, which allowed examiners to "look for all defects, both mental and physical"[35] that may not have been clear at first glance. To a naïve immigrant the process was frightening and degrading.

This climate of detainment without explanation caused much of the fear on the island, and was a direct result of unnecessary debarments by physicians unconsciously swayed by their own ethnocentrism.[36] These prejudices against various immigrant groups "linked the immigrants' physical condition to a supposed inferior character and lifestyle" based on their place of origin.[37] If a certain disease

29 Britia Rosendor, interview by Paul E. Sigrist, *North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories*, accessed March 12, 2015, http://solomon.imld.alexanderstreet.com.

30 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 764.

31 King, *Making Americans*, 20. The concept of assimilation was based on an immigrants ability to adhere to certain qualifications of American society, rather than the alternative philosophy of the "melting pot" which favored diversity of immigrants.

32 Ibid., 158.

33 Thomas Iaci, interview by Janet Levine, September 2, 1992, *North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories*, accessed March 12, 2015. http://solomon.imld.alexanderstreet.com.

34 Ibid, Paragraph 2.

35 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 741.

36 Kraut, "Silent Travelers," 382.

37 Ibid., 388.

or ailment was associated with a region, as many were in Southern and Eastern Europe, immigrants arriving from these locations could be held and subjected to medical examination based on prejudicial suspicions. A Russian immigrant and her family were subjected to such prejudice and held in a medical inspection room for suspicion of disease, although they showed no symptoms.[38] The daughter, Gilda Hochman, stated that "they [immigration inspectors] deloused us. And that was so embarrassing. They would pick up the hair and so on."[39] This represents the general trend of inspectors placing stereotypes and suspicions of immigrants into their professional opinions.

Immigrant experiences such as these link the prejudice against new immigrants to the emerging national belief that medical criteria could be used as justification for immigrant restriction.[40] Immigration officers medically isolated many of these immigrants in an effort to validate they were unassimilable to American society. However, the poor conditions were not solely reserved for the undesirable new immigrants. Any person detained for further medical examination was subjected to confusing practices, extended detainments, and unsanitary quarters. Linnea Hallgren, an immigrant arriving from Sweden with her family in 1915, was held for seven weeks total,[41] and accounted of the strange inspection procedures they were subjected to: "And then we were taken to the hospital, and first of all my mother and I were told to get into a bathtub. The bathtub was filthy dirty, and my mother, she balked at going in. So the attendant, she said, 'You've got to go.' So my mother and I got into this dirty bathtub to take a bath, and then, well, they were such a mess. There was such a mix-up of fear."[42] The extended detainment was due to suspicion that a member of the family was "feeble-minded" due to an inability to fully comprehend English.[43] However, very few immigrants coming to America, from the new and old nations alike, were capable of speaking or understanding fluent English.

38 Gilda Hochman, interview by Janet Levine, May 8, 1992, *North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories*, accessed March 12, 2015, http://solomon.imld.alexanderstreet.com.

39 Ibid.

40 Kraut, "Silent Travelers," 385.

41 Hallgren, interview by Janet Levine.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid. "Feeblemindedness" at the time referred to the mentally handicapped, the uneducated, or the mentally ill. Many immigrants that were labeled as feebleminded were consequently detained or even deported.

This became an especially significant factor upon the implementation of the literacy test, which served to eliminate feeble-minded immigrants and those deemed unable to assimilate into American society.[44] However, this system was flawed and proved too challenging for many competent immigrants. Even a former soldier in the U.S. Army was detained at Ellis Island for failing the test; a newspaper documenting the story stated: "Failing in the literacy test at Ellis Island, and asked if he 'understood' the English language, he replied: 'I understood orders in the army'."[45] Even a former American soldier who had his citizenship documents was denied entry because of restrictionist mentalities affect on immigration policy. This event highlights the true purpose of immigration processes – to further promote restrictionist policy and curb the tide of immigrants coming to America.[46] These restrictionist ideals ultimately resulted in increasing detainments rates on Ellis Island.[47] The atmosphere on the island slowly grew to that of fear and uncertainty for immigrants, where "many of them were like men condemned to die, praying and crying for last-minute reprieves – clinging to fraying threads of hope."[48]

Detainments rose as the inspection process became manipulated to support the fears and prejudices associated with new immigrants. As soon as "immigration officials had discovered the persuasiveness of 'expert testimony' in the form of medical diagnoses as supporting evidence for immigration restriction,"[49] the process became a vessel for the bias, prejudice, and fears of employees. It also became an opportunity to shift the responsibility of exclusion from the government to doctors, and was largely impacted by efforts to detain immigration.[50] It was these external influences that ultimately caused over fifty percent of the deportations for

44 Connors, *review of Xenophobia and Immigration*, 257.

45 "Ex-Soldier Held at Ellis Island upon illiteracy Charge," Grand Forks Daily Herald, January 4, 1921, 4.

46 Connors, *review of Xenophobia and Immigration*, 258.

47 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 763. Rates rose from 2% being detained for medical reasons in 1898, to 57% by 1913, and after WWI (1918), up to 69% of all immigrants detained, were detained for medical reasons.

48 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 99.

49 Kraut, "Silent Travelers," 384.

50 Ibid., 385. "Congress passed a law in 1907 that gave physicians the option of stating on a medical certificate whether a particular illness or deformity might make a newcomer 'likely to be a public charge"

alleged mental and physical disease to be unjustified.[51] This large margin of error in detainments resulted because "at the end of this thorough investigation, the invisible was brought to light, and more often than not, imagined and invented by inspectors, despite immigrant's apparent healthiness and 'normality'."[52]

This ability for inspectors to invent the very conditions they feared on Ellis Island developed the link between social and medical heath, and was present at every step in the medical inspection process. When immigrants first arrived, they passed through the initial line inspection, in which an officer would look for physical ailments of the "scalp, face, neck, hands, gait, and general condition,"[53] while another would look for signs of stupidity or inattentiveness.[54] However, this process contained heavy bias, and was based on the belief that social status and race were heavily interrelated, and that certain medial implications were attached to each race and class.[55] This idea of social and medical health being intertwined led to harsh assessments of even the slightest symptoms, and greatly lengthened the process. In the initial stage, every effort was made to detect signs of physical or mental defect, and many immigrants were chalk marked for further investigation, initiating the detainment process.[56]

After being marked for further inspection, immigrants proceeded to either another mental or physical examiner. Yet, because physical signs also suggested a relation to mental medicine, many detained immigrants were questioned for mental deformity.[57] Due to the prevalent belief that the new immigrants were undesirable and likely to become public charges, the mental inspection process revolved greatly around racial assumptions. A former medial inspector admitted that upon realizing

51 Ibid., 386. The full quote from former Commissioner William Williams reads "I felt then and I feel the same today, that over fifty percent of the deportations for alleged mental disease were unjustified." Note this is referencing deportations, however if deportations were unjustified the resulting detainments would have been as well.

52 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 153.

53 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 735.

54 Ibid., 735.

55 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 148.

56 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 735. Immigrants suspected of physical or mental defect had a symbol drawn on their coats, intented to alert the next officer as to what the suspected condition was, as well as prevent the immigrant from moving forward.

57 Ibid., 737.

the race of an immigrant, "the peculiar attitude of the alien in question is no longer peculiar; it is readily accounted for by racial considerations."[58] These racial stigmas associated with most immigrants proved to negatively affect their chances of passing medical inspection. Due to rising American fear of the undesirables, medical inspections served to plainly distinguish new immigrants from old and demonstrated the unsuitability, as potential citizens, of the new arrivals.[59] This caused the process to become increasingly subjective, and have fewer justifiable causes for detainment.

Adding to the subjectivity, immigration officers could separate immigrants after they were marked to be detained in accordance with their own discretion. However, the immigrants were largely unaware of why the separation occurred, and most were confined in unsanitary, compact quarters. Linnea Hallgren, also accounted of this confusing separation, recalling that "in the beginning there we were separated. Uh, Mother and I were separated, got into one room. My father, we didn't know what happened to him. He got sent off to another section. And then my sister, they took her into another section."[60] Unbeknownst to newly detained immigrants, these separations were based upon race, gender, and even class.[61] These considerations were intertwined with health and physicians "linked the immigrants' physical condition to a supposed inferior character and lifestyle."[62]

This prejudicial assessment of immigrants promoted the restrictionist ideals circulating American society at the time, and the government supported increased detainments as a result. Commissioner William Williams, in correlation with the executive office, stated he was "firmly opposed to an open-door policy; [he] favored a radical restrictionist policy whereby no immigrants would be admitted unless they would be of immediate benefit to the United States."[63]

Due to the commonly accepted link at the time between social potential and medical health, and in order to have immigration rates match national sentiments, the medical inspection process grew increasingly subjective. Taking the racial ste-

58 Ibid., 738.
59 King, *Making Americans*, 73-74.
60 Hallgren, interview by Janet Levine.
61 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 744.
62 Kraut, "Silent Travelers," 382.
63 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration,* 124.

reotypes of the new immigrants into consideration, what determined a mental or physical deformity became extremely lenient, had little definition, and varied per inspector. In essence, the process' purpose altered to preserve the ideal American race.[64] This idea of preservation came with misguided diagnoses of physical and mental ailments. Officers would commonly verify mental instability if an immigrant possessed mannerisms of a race besides their own, as this was considered a symptom of insanity.[65]

However, there were many other illegitimate reasons given for various medical detainments. The requirement of inspectors to mark detained immigrants with the suspected aliment provided insight into these irrational diagnoses. According to the Public Health Records, a Russian immigrant was tagged with; "Loves America and wishes to defend America. Will go into Army; delusions of patriotism," and consequently held on an insanity charge.[66] Although detainment for patriotism presents a paradox of the fears circulating within American society, this immigrant's detainment was due to his migration during the interwar years, the growing belief that foreignness itself was a contagion, and the notion that new immigrants possessed the most dangerous of qualities.[67]

Even after passing the various medical examinations, there was still a final step of inspection meant to deny the foreigners who were a "danger to the public health of the United States."[68] The reasons for these detainments ranged from an immigrant being a suspected anarchist, bigamist, pauper, criminal, or to being seen as otherwise unfit.[69] Many immigrants were detained due to their lack of financial resources, according to the belief that they would become an economic and social drain on the nation, and thus would be a public charge.[70] However, the detainment of those "otherwise unfit" was the most inaccurately imposed, was heavily influenced by restrictionist mentalities, and was left to the discretion of the immigration service.

64 Ibid., 125-126.
65 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 738.
66 Ibid., 741.
67 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 160.
68 "Say Europe Is Moving To U. S. Commissioner Wallis of Ellis Island Immigration Station: So Tells Senate Committee," *Augusta Chronicle*, January 6, 1921, 1.
69 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 736.
70 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 764.

With the heightened fear of foreignness and the attempt to prevent the undesirables from degrading American society, the number of medical diagnoses began to increase and deportations rose accordingly.[71] As former commissioner Corsi described the process, it was "deportation in wholesome quantities, the purging of the caravan of its undesirables."[72] This mass purging manifested itself through questionable detainments. In one such instance, a young Italian girl was documented and held for being too "emotional, talkative,"[73] and tagged under suspicion of suffering from mania. Although many immigrants appeared quiet and fearful in general, mere talkativeness was not sufficient evidence to prove an immigrant a maniac, as per the written inspection standards it must be "further believed by the certifying officer that his mental condition will decidedly handicap him among his fellows in the struggle for existence."[74] Because of these measures, the girl did pass after a week of detainment.

However, with this standard for deportation set in place, the rapid increase in diagnoses represented the racial prejudices and restrictionist ideals among the staff on Ellis Island,[75] and little proof of illness was required in many detainments. In 1917, one of the initial postwar years where distaste of new immigrants grew significantly, over 974 immigrants were unnecessarily held on Ellis Island for suspected mental issues, which in fact they did not have.[76] In the two months that followed, the number rose to 2,450 immigrants who were consequently permitted to pass.[77] During the thirty busiest years of Ellis Island's operation, an average of only two percent of detained immigrants were actually deported.[78] Because the mass detainments did not normally result in deportation, the island experienced massive overcrowding and extremely poor conditions.

71 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 153.

72 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 101.

73 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 741.

74 Ibid., 746.

75 King, *Making Americans*, 178. "Racial degeneracy" of New Immigrants became a pervasive prejudice among immigration oficials, and promoted restrictionist ideals in the island's operations

76 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 746. These statistics come from a primary document which contains a record/chart of the number of detainments and numeer of "Feeble-minded" immigrants from June, July, and August of 1917.

77 Ibid., 746.

78 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 149.

Many immigrants who were not sick when detained later contracted an illness while on the island. In essence, this justified their initial detainment and the medical inspectors, through their own prejudices and fears, literally created the ailments they feared. As Corsi described the problem: "With so many people packed together under such conditions, it was naturally impossible for them to keep clean, for the clean ones were pressed against aliens infected with vermin, and it was not long before they were all contaminated."[79] The sickness on the island further promoted the idea that foreignness itself was a contagion and that certain immigrants were more contagious than others.[80]

This association between racial and medical health led to inspectors deeming specific immigrants to not only be more of a threat to American society, but also to be less assimilable than others.[81] As written in a 1920 medical journal, it was accepted that the only way to retain the "purity of the Americans . . . was to limit the influx of people endowed with inferior 'blood'."[82] The concept of eugenics being linked to both social and physical health increased racial stigmas against the new immigrants and labeled some members of the community as "less worthy of equality of treatment than others."[83] Because many new immigrants were not seen as an immediate benefit to society,[84] they were detained during the inspection process for a variety of unfounded reasons and were kept in separated examination rooms.[85]

In one such case, the public heath report listed a single mother from Eastern Europe detained for "crying and weeping because her little 21 year old daughter is alone."[86] Suspected of mental disability, the woman and her daughter were separated and individually examined per procedure. However, there was not sufficient medical evidence to support detainment, a common situation on the island. Rather, these immigrants were held for being potential public charges to the state as single

79 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 78.

80 King, *Making Americans*, 168.

81 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 760.

82 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 126. Although not all immigration officials believed in the purity of American society to this extent, eugenics and genetic study had a prominent role in the classification and prejudice of the "new immigrants"

83 King, *Making Americans*, 168.

84 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 124.

85 Rosendor, interview by Paul E. Sigrist.

86 Mullen, "Mental Examination of Immigrants," 742.

women were considered as social and economic burdens. As one employee stated: "We could not let her lose on the streets of a strange city looking for a husband . . . the inspector would detain the woman, and her children if she had any."[87] This particular account exhibits the judgments made by the inspector, as well as both the racial and gender prejudices that consistently found their way into medical examinations on the island. At one time, Commissioner William Wallis accounted for "over seventeen hundred of these women and children kept in one room with a normal capacity of six hundred."[88]

These massive detainments represented the fear among citizens that the character of America was changing, and the belief that the social health of the community was in danger.[89] Whether stemming from an actual medical diagnosis or a misguided social construct, countless immigrants were unnecessarily subjected to poor treatment and extended detainments on Ellis Island. Motivated by fear and a desire to preserve and ideal American society, the inspection process became corrupted and served to perpetuate racial prejudices and restrictionist ideals.

At the center of these restrictionist policies was the American government, which motivated the anti-immigration sentiments on Ellis Island and throughout the nation. Due to a combination of overcapacity and a desire to preserve the American societal ideal, the government initiated a series of anti-immigration and restrictionist acts that legally curbed the tide of immigration. However, given the government's focus on preserving the quality of immigration, there was little concern for properly funding the island to provide better experiences for the rest of the immigrants. As Corsi worded it, "There was never enough money, however, to prevent the conditions of detention from being unpleasant for all, terrifying for most, and tragic for a few."[90] There was little governmental concern for Ellis Island operations or how conditions there affected immigrants passing through. Efforts to restrict immigration were fully initiated after WWI. As the war had prompted a national fear of

87 Corsi, *In the Shadow*, 75.

88 Ibid., 77.

89 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 119.

90 Robert D. Cross, *review of Keepers of the Gate: A History of Ellis Island by Thomas M. Pitkin, International Migration Review* (1977): 103.

foreigners and thus increased Americanization efforts,[91] the short-term suppression of certain groups and individual values[92] was frequently observed in the processing center on Ellis Island.

This postwar change was documented in an article in the Augusta Chronicle in 1921, when Commissioner William Wallis corroborated that; "The war has undermined the public heath of those countries [Europe] and their emigrants are 'dangerous to the public health of the United States'."[93] These mentalities caused end of welcoming all people and the acceptance of all races on Ellis Island.[94]

However, a multitude of values and ideologies influenced the increasing discrimination of the new immigrant populations. What emerged among the public and government as the ideal American society was largely influenced by race, pathology, and nationalism.[95] The postwar climate caused more and more Americans to accept that the character of immigration was changing, and they began to mentally separate the new immigrants from the old.[96]

These ideals manifested into physical separations on the island between the ideal immigrants and the undesirables. An examiner on the island, Dr. Edward Mullen, admitted that the "change in the source of arriving immigrants and resulting differences in the character of the people" fueled the widespread resentment of the new immigrants, and led to restrictionist policies and initiatives on the island.[97] Furthermore, the restrictionist government of the time realized the ability to deter unwanted immigrants in the inspection process through medical rather than national means. This "opportunity to shift the responsibility and onus for exclusion from policymakers to physicians" created objective medical criteria that could later be used as justification for immigrant restriction.[98]

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91 King, *Making Americans*, 90. Americanism in this context refers to a "particular version of American identity; not as one open to national or ethnic diversity". 123.

92 Alan M. Kraut, review of *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of Diverse Democracy by Desmond King*, Journal of Ethnic American History (2002): 137.

93 "Say Europe Is Moving To U. S.," 1.

94 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 767.

95 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 144.

96 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 110.

97 Kraut, "Silent Travelers," 388. Quote by Dr. Clark and Dr. Schereschewsky in 1910; both medical examiners on Ellis Island at the time.

98 Ibid., 385.

It was this subjectivity that intensified the fear associated with the medical inspection process and increased the level of bias among immigration employees. However the government was not solely responsible for the abuse of the medical inspection process, as even "immigration officials had discovered the persuasiveness of expert testimony in the form of medical diagnoses as supporting evidence for immigration restriction."[99] These inspection policies were the only legal and successful way that immigrants could be deterred without hindrance from congressional procedure or public opinion, and because of this, the medical inspection process became a representation of the desire to preserve the unity of the nation along medical, racial, and class lines.[100]

It was this link between the new immigrants and a supposed racial and societal inferiority that led to the overall support of restrictionist policies. Combined with the growing xenophobia after WWI, the American government and public began to fear the rapid influx of the new immigrants.[101] The millions of immigrants which arrived over these peak immigration years aggravated the existing concern that foreigner would degrade the quality of American society.[102] In 1921, the Kansas City Star reported that most Americans believed the new immigrants were "highly undesirable" and could "never be assimilated nor made decent citizens."[103] However, these mentalities were based on a fear of foreignness that manifested itself through racial prejudices, social stigmas, and government restrictions. This idea that only the ideal immigrant could assimilate and benefit American society was a leading force in the prejudice against the new immigrants who were seen as "a movement of unskilled laboring men who have come, in large part temporarily, from the less progressive and advanced countries of Europe, in response to the call for industrial workers in the eastern and middle western United States."[104]

99 Ibid., 384.

100 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 138.

101 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 114.

102 Connors, review of *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 257.

103 "A New Immigration Plan Senator Would 'Suggest' to Europe U. S. Gates Are Closed," *Kansas City Star*, January 4, 1921, 4.

104 King, *Making Americans*, 59. Quote by a former commissioner.

Due to this consideration of the new immigrants as unskilled and less progressive, they were viewed as having less political and social commitment to the United States.[105] This belief in a mutual commitment to the ideal nation initiated much of the racial prejudice of the time. In essence, the goal among the public and government was to preserve the purity of American stock, and to exclude all those who did not fit the ideal.[106]

The immigrants who were regarded as unworthy were significantly devalued over other ethnic groups and came to represent racial stigmas such as disease, criminality, and insanity.[107] These prejudices, along with the belief that newcomers of poor quality were toxic to society, led the government to take action on problem of mass unwanted immigration.[108] Beginning in 1924 with the establishment of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, the government imposed strict quotas on new immigrants. As the act openly favored Northern and Western European immigrants, it contextually contained assumptions of immigrants and took into account the racial differences of the arriving immigrants.[109] This act, along with the more descriptive and xenophobic National Origins Act,[110] helped to significantly curb the numbers of undesirable immigrants by 1929.[111] These laws not only backed national sentiments and affected the processing center on Ellis Island but also served the greater purpose of establishing national security and prosperity through mobilizing selective racism.[112]Among these policies, the Immigration Restriction League emerged to promote further restriction of the unassimilable immigrants.[113] This group, along with other radical xenophobic movements, petitioned Congress to enact further restrictionist policies against select immigrant groups.[114]

The concept of excluding groups such as Eastern Europeans, Italians, Germans, etc. on the premise of race required many immigrants to sacrifice their

105 Ibid., 59.
106 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 145.
107 King, *Making Americans*, 19.
108 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 767.
109 King, *Making Americans*, 195.
110 Cross, review of Keepers of the Gate, 105.
111 King, *Making Americans*, 123.
112 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 142.
113 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 114.
114 King, *Making Americans*, 76.

identity for the good of the nation. Thus, certain groups were deemed more valuable to society than others, and true diversity was considered to be detrimental to the survival of the American nation state.

The notion that the American nation was endangered by the decreasing social and physical quality of immigrants caused the inspectors on Ellis Island to pit the ideal citizen against the alien other.[115] The process was a direct result of the belief that the only way to preserve society within a functioning nation state was through the negation of everything that falls outside its borders.[116] In excluding the undesirable outsiders, the American economy, society, and citizenry would be preserved.

However, not only the government and Ellis Island functioned under these assumptions. Public figures, community leaders, and even religious institutions perpetuated the fear of the outsider. As a Protestant clergyman was reported to declare in a 1923 sermon, for example, immigrants were seen as "wretches trooping out, wretches physically, wretches morally … what shall we do if the American race is to receive a constant influx of that sort of thing, which such a history as they had had?"[117] These restrictionist and prejudicial ideologies fueled the fear that American society would fall victim to the degrading quality of the poor immigrants.

In order to combat this, the government and public came to view cohesion and uniformity as the best defense against the influence of the undesirables.[118] Through the immigration and naturalization laws of 1921, 1924, and 1929,[119] the former "melting-pot" mindset of America was transformed from one of acceptance to one that discouraged diversity and foreignness.[120] Assimilation became the primary goal of immigration, and those deemed unable to assimilate were seen as a threat to the functioning American nation state.[121] Both the public and government were unmoving in their ability to adapt to the constant influx of new immigrants and instead

115 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 159.
116 Ibid., 157.
117 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 109.
118 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 160.
119 Connors, review of *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 258.
120 King, *Making Americans*, 19.
121 Stern and Minna, "The Foreignness of Germs," 760.

sought measures to discourage their entry. Ellis Island then came to function as an embodiment of governmental measures and representation of societal concerns.

Following WWI, immigration into the United States drastically increased, however its changing quality altered society's view of it. Postwar xenophobia and prejudicial assumptions of racial inferiority combined to degrade the perceived quality of the new immigrants before they even arrived.[122] Once on the island, poor conditions and harsh treatment greeted many of the new immigrants, and an increase of unnecessary detainments resulted. This led to vast overcrowding and only exacerbated the already terrible conditions many immigrants faced. However, the immigration inspectors perpetuated the ailments they feared through their own racial prejudices, xenophobia, and restrictionist mentalities.[123] Social potential became intrinsically linked to physical health and prejudicial assumptions were attached to some ethnic groups, which categorized them as physically and socially ill.[124]

Furthermore, an immigrant's potential in society was based on their ability to assimilate into the existing environment. This led to legislation that attempted to deter undesirables and resulted in even more unfounded detainments.[125] Although the tide of immigration was eventually curbed, these measures did little to successfully prohibit new immigrants from entering into the United States. Rather, they motivated racial stereotypes, foreign disdain, and restrictionist ideals. The abysmal experiences of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island were the result of poorly executed inspection processes, which in turn had stemmed from xenophobic national ideals. The attempt to preserve an ideal American society thus resulted in the unavoidable "confrontation of essentially powerless newcomers with an all-powerful state machinery" on Ellis Island.[126]

122 Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration*, 114.

123 Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity," 153.

124 Ibid., 148.

125 See note 120. Immigration and Naturalization laws of 1921, 1924, and 1929 include the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 and the National Origins Act of 1924 both of which set strict ethnic quotas on immigration.

126 Cross, *review of Keepers of the Gate*, 103.