

Atlantic historical migrations, 1500–1965

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Atlantic significance

Over three-quarters of the present-day population of the Western Hemisphere are descended from people who crossed the Atlantic to settle there during the last five centuries. This broad, diverse, and long-lived human relocation helped to reshape the global economy, and studies of it have furthered the theoretical and practical understanding of modern mass migration generally.

The most important distinguishing characteristics of mass transatlantic migration, however, have not been the aspirations or accomplishments of the migrants or their impact on the regions they populated, but rather some key features of their relocation; especially its breadth, diversity, longevity, and transparency. Dozens of ethnic groups moved in large numbers to many destinations and economic sectors, over centuries, leaving an extensive documentary record. About a third migrated through the port of New York, for example, which collected passenger list records for most of them, and where within a few years of its 17th-century founding as New Amsterdam, 18 different languages were spoken (McEvedy & Jones 1978; Shenton & Kennedy 1997; Eltis 2002a, 2002b).

Sources, destinations, and subperiods

The sources, destinations, character, and intensity of transatlantic migration varied over time with prevailing political and economic climates. Before the early 1800s, most migrants were involuntarily imported from Africa to supply plantation labor to the tropical New World. Thereafter, most were Europeans moving voluntarily to temperate zones of the Americas. The flow peaked during the seven decades preceding World War I. Key sending and receiving regions between 1500 and 1965 are shown in Table 1, divided into three sub-

periods: “organized migration” (1500–1819), “autonomous migration” (1820–1914) and “quota migration” (1915–65).

In the “organized migration” period before 1820, migration was limited by the supply of people able to reach and viably settle in the New World. Most migrants in this era were forcibly transported African slaves. Even the non-slave minority was mostly the result of organized group movements, often sponsored by governments, such as settlers recruited for chartered colonies, religious missionaries, exiles, soldiers, convict labor, and indentured servants.

The century of “autonomous migration” before World War I was marked by voluntary European migrants responding to transatlantic economic incentives. Improved transport and communication links made Western Hemisphere opportunities more readily and widely accessible. Government policies helped reinforce movements governed mainly by rapidly growing but cyclically fluctuating demand for low-skilled labor in industry, construction, and urban services.

In the final period of “quota migration,” the transatlantic flow was greatly hindered by political factors (the two world wars, the cold war, and strict legal barriers, particularly in the United States), and the depression of the 1930s. This period ends in the 1960s with the removal of US quotas discriminating against non-Atlantic immigrants, and the post-World War II economic boom reducing incentives for European relocation to the Americas (Nugent 1992; Eltis 2002a, 2002b; Hoerder 2002).

Organized migration, 1500–1819

The “repeopling” of the Western Hemisphere followed catastrophic declines in native populations who lacked immunity to deadly Eastern Hemisphere diseases introduced after 1492. This demographic collapse catalyzed the longer-term subjugation, removal, and absorption of the American indigenes. The ensuing influx of European settlers and their African slaves, accompanied by Eurasian plants, animals, technologies, and institutions, facilitated the emergence of “neo-Europes” in temperate latitudes

Table 1 Transatlantic migration by region and time period, 1500–1965

	<i>Origins</i>						<i>All</i>
	<i>Africa</i>	<i>British Isles</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Eastern Europe</i>	<i>Others</i>	
1500–1819	8	1				1	10
1820–1914	2	10	7	8	7	13	47
1915–1965		3	3	2	3	5	16
1500–1965	10	14	10	10	10	19	73
	<i>Destinations</i>						<i>All</i>
	<i>Caribbean</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Others</i>	
1500–1819	4	1			3	2	10
1820–1914	2	29	5	5	4	2	47
1915–1965	1	6	3	3	2	1	16
1500–1965	7	36	8	8	9	5	73

Note: Approximate gross westward migration, in millions of people. Net movement was as much as one-third lower, due mainly to repatriation. Regional demarcation based on present-day jurisdiction is consistently applied throughout all three sub-periods here.

Sources: Based on McEvedy & Jones 1978, Willcox & Ferenczi 1931, Mitchell 1998, Nugent 1992, Carter et al. 2006, and Hoerder 2002.

of the Americas. Significant and sustained population growth in Europe after 1500 generated growing numbers of potential overseas migrants.

Transatlantic migration to the Western Hemisphere developed more rapidly and intensively than transpacific movement because distances were one-third to one-half shorter, and because pre-existing European markets for overseas goods, and for trade in African slaves, could be readily connected to New World opportunities. England established outposts in North America, whereas Portugal and Spain concentrated on Central and South America. Promotional schemes encouraged settlement by Europeans who developed transatlantic commerce in mineral extraction, furs, fish, and timber. Tropical plantation agriculture, particularly cane sugar in the Caribbean and Brazil, was both more lucrative and more labor-intensive; tropical diseases took a heavy toll of settlers and the work itself was onerous. Given the preeminence of these factors in the period, most transatlantic migrants were coerced Africans.

Contracted servitude was the most common means by which European migrants came to colonial North America. In return for several

years of bound work, these servants were provided with oceanic passage, room and board, New World experience, and a final bonus (known as “freedom dues”) (McEvedy & Jones 1978; Daniels 1990; Crosby 1991; Hoerder 2002; Eltis 2002a, 2002b).

Autonomous migration, 1820–1914

Voluntary labor migration carried out by relatively autonomous kinship networks characterized the century of transatlantic peace that occurred between the Napoleonic wars and World War I. Contracted servants were replaced in commodity-crop agriculture by slaves, and in other sectors by family “chain migration” using remittances, prepaid tickets, and repeat or circular movement. By the mid-19th century, most transatlantic migrants worked outside agriculture, even if acquiring land remained an ultimate goal sought by many of them or their descendants. Industrialization across the century expanded overseas opportunities for European migrants of modest means and skills, in factories, in urban services, and in construction. The development of railway networks and steamship routes made travel easier and more reliable.

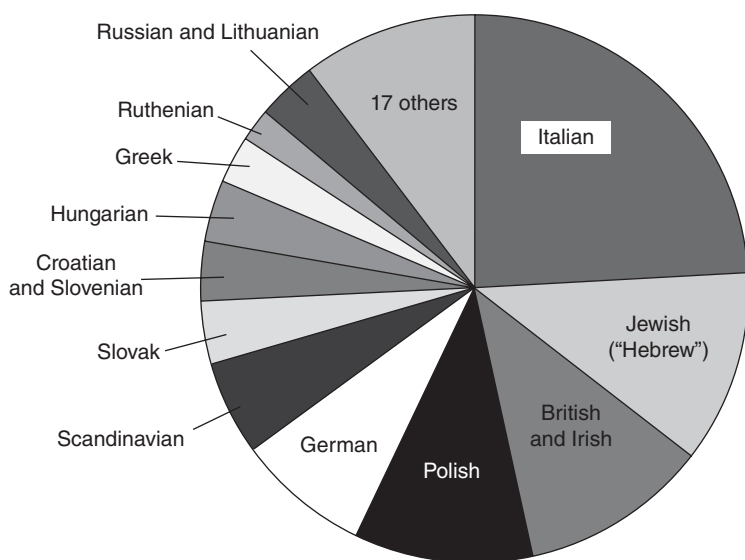


Figure 1 European immigrants to the United States by ethnic/linguistic group, 1900–14.

Source: US Bureau of Immigration, 1914, pp. 101–102, based on 13 million US immigrants of European “race” during these fifteen years. (A further 800,000 immigrants from 10 non-European “races” are not included here.)

Government policies facilitated transatlantic relocation. European barriers to exit, such as serfdom, were removed, and transportation infrastructure was supported and made safer (and some parts of South America provided travel subsidies to migrants). Military conscription and ethnic discrimination helped prompt mass emigration out of Eastern Europe. Barriers to their settlement in Western Europe, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, helped encourage transatlantic relocation instead (Hansen 1940; Daniels 1990; McKeown 2004; Cohn 2009: 173–175).

The largest source of migrants over the period was the British Isles, where emigration peaked during the mid-century potato famine. The German states were the second most prolific supplier, and the German empire from 1880 to 1895 the largest. Italy thereafter took the lead, until 1914, followed closely by the multiethnic Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. The United States was the largest recipient, although northern Italians favored Argentina. Canada was a “sieve,” pulling in millions (particularly from the British Isles), but

with most later moving on to the United States, until 1900. Brazil took in fewer, except during the 1890s following the end of slavery when government subsidies were provided to southern European immigrants (Nugent 1992; Carter 2006).

Ethnic diversity in this period (see Figure 1) reflects both the variety and the commonality of circumstances prompting emigration. Irish and East European Jewish migrants, for instance, had not only atypically high rates of departure from Europe, and low rates of return to it, but also unusually high rates of females (about one-half for the Irish) and children (about one-quarter for Jewish immigrants). English fluency gave young Irish women good opportunities as domestics in America, while Jews facing economic and religious discrimination in the “Pale of Settlement” often left as entire families, whether at once or in stages. As a whole, however, and across almost every other ethnicity, European emigrants in this period were mostly males moving as part of staged family-network relocation. Young adults were over-represented, as

were those from rural regions with little hope of land acquisition or other attractive goals at home (Daniels 1990; Nugent 1992).

Transatlantic migration reached its highest rates and greatest diversity in this period. The United States took two-thirds of the flow and a majority of every European ethnic group except Spanish and Portuguese. The United States had more fertile land than anywhere else, with growing seasons and rainfall suitable for a wide range of crops, and was relatively accessible via coastal harbors and inland waterways. A decisive 17th-century early start expanded by the mid-19th century into an unsurpassable ability to absorb further migration (despite Mexico having more people before 1820, Brazil more land before 1867, and Argentina a faster rate of economic growth in the late 1800s) (Hansen 1940; Nugent 1992; Mitchell 1998; Hoerder 2002).

Quota migration, 1915–65

World War I, and its associated blockades, submarine attacks, and changed patterns of labor demand, reduced transatlantic migration by nearly 90 percent. Particularly in the United States, the war stimulated alternatives to European immigration (such as mechanization, female workers, northward migration of blacks, and inflows from other Western Hemisphere countries) weakening the pre-war political coalition behind unrestricted transatlantic relocation.

Labor unions gained popularity, and mistrust of foreigners grew. Greatly reduced migration was legally instituted by the US quota restrictions of the mid-1920s. Other countries followed only later with less severe barriers, but their immigration offset only a small portion of the US reduction. During this “quota migration” period, for the first time, a sizable fraction of Atlantic migrants were refugees. Most of them came in the aftermath of World War II and during the cold war, when revised quota rules permitted more of them. The US Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 ending national-origins discrimination, though not quotas themselves, marks the conclusion of

this period. Since then, refugee flows have been a small fraction of economic migration, and transatlantic relocation from Europe has been greatly exceeded by inter-American movements and transpacific flows from Asia (Willcox & Ferenczi 1931; Nugent 1992; Mitchell 1998).

Historical issues

The size and diversity of US immigration have stimulated many historical studies of particular subgroups and subregions (e.g. Baily 1996). Notable amongst the historiography of the “subject as a whole” are the call of Frank Thistlethwaite (1991), following Marcus Hansen (1940) for a rending of the “salt-water curtain” bifurcating European origins and American destinations, and Oscar Handlin’s probing of the immigrant experience in broad perspective, later re-analyzed by John Bodnar (1985). Atlantic historic migrations have also attracted in-depth scrutinies by scholars outside the subject discipline of history, notably economists (Baines 1991; Hatton & Williamson 1998), political scientists (Tichenor 2002), and sociologists (Massey 2000). These studies have produced important insights into the fundamental workings of migration: the origins and costs of mass migration, the costs and benefits to migrants and the societies they left and joined, and the impacts on ethnic identity, politics, culture, and so on. Among new directions of inquiry, mention can be made of racial and national issues (Jacobson 1998), identity and assimilation (Bodnar 1985; Shenton & Kennedy 1997), gender (Gabaccia 1994), processes shaping migration (Eltis 2002; Tichenor 2002), migration theory (Tilly 1990; Diner 2000; Hoerder 2002), and comparisons between Atlantic and other migrations (Chan 1990; Nugent 1992; McKeown 2004).

Patterns and parallels

Aspects of Atlantic historic migration have parallels and policy implications for 21st century global migration (Massey 2000; Keeling 2011). Similar to the present, transatlantic migrants

before 1965 – at least the self-selected majority – were of the “middling” class, neither wealthy nor destitute, but “enterprising people able to make cooperative decisions” (Nugent 1992: 96).

As in other places and times, this migration was concentrated in clusters of source regions, destinations, and occupations. Extending old world networks, the transatlantic slave trade selected its victims from vulnerable groups in western and western central Africa. Serial, stage and circular migration within kinship “chains” across the 19th- and 20th-century Atlantic was also geographically specialized. Turn-of-the-20th-century emigrants were much more numerous, for instance, from northern Hungary than central Hungary. One-third took US jobs in mining. A fifth of Polish emigrants then worked in Pennsylvanian coalfields. In the United States overall, immigrants accounted for half the workforce in New York and Chicago, and half of railway laborers and garment makers. Foreign-born females dominated laundering, domestic service and needle trades. In Argentina, 70 percent of Buenos Aires residents, 80 percent of manufacturing workers, and 90 percent of small business owners were foreign-born. These – and many similar – clustering examples also helped shape the persistence, adaptation and transformation of immigrant group identities (Tilly 1990; Daniels 1990; Nugent 1992).

SEE ALSO: Atlantic early modern migrations and economic globalization; Forced migration; Maritime migrations; Migration control; Spanish America, early modern migration, 16th–18th century

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