CHAPTER 3

Immigration Policies of Britain

Most immigration to Britain has been permanent. Thus, in accordance with the theory advanced here, British immigration control policy has been influenced by the volume of dissimilar immigration, foreign policy considerations, external threats, and wars. The state of the British economy affected immigration policy to some degree, although its impact was smaller than that of the other factors. Britain also experienced some temporary labor migration, which was primarily influenced by the state of the economy.

British Immigration Policy in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Until the early twentieth century, Britain had a liberal immigration policy. Only on two occasions, in 1793 and in 1848, did Britain regulate immigration. In both cases the controls were the result of an association of immigration with external threats. The 1792–1793 Aliens Act incorporated several regulations: it required ship captains arriving in Britain to give customs officers details of any foreigners transported by them; it ordered the arriving aliens to give the customs officer an account of their personal history and status; it enabled the King in Council to direct that aliens live in specific districts; and it allowed for the deportation of aliens who had been imprisoned. According to Plender, the immediate cause for the act was the flight of a small number of refugees from the French Revolution. Their arrival coincided with the Francophobia that accompanied the deterioration in relations between Britain and France, and with fears that Jacobin agents had infiltrated the ranks of the refugees. The Aliens Act was phrased as a temporary measure, but although it was relaxed in 1802 and 1814, it

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was renewed at intervals until 1926. The act was also accompanied, during the national emergency preceding the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars, by other restrictions on traditional freedoms, such as the Traitorous Correspondence Bill and Fox’s Libel Bill. This first restriction on immigration was the product of fears of an external threat, since the volume of immigration from France was very small, and the country experienced economic prosperity in 1792.

The other pre-1905 restriction on immigration was enacted in 1848, when political instability in Europe produced a flow of political refugees, whose presence in England generated fears of disturbances. As was the case in 1792, the external threat represented by those refugees led to the approval of the Aliens Removal Act, which provided the Home Secretary and the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland with power to deport any alien against whom written allegations had been made. The Act was not renewed in 1849.

**British Immigration Policy, 1905–1938**

Britain kept a liberal immigration policy until the early twentieth century. This policy was facilitated by the limited immigration into Britain, by the similarity between most of the immigrants and the local population, and by foreign policy considerations. However, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, an influx of Eastern European Jews generated local demands for restrictions on immigration. Between 1880 and 1914, pogroms led to a significant migration of Russian Jews to Britain, resulting in the quintupling of the Jewish population. The Jewish immigration was unprecedented in that it was largely composed of people who spoke no English, were poor, and whose occupation had been that of small artisans and traders in an agricultural society. At first, there was limited support for restrictions. A 1889 Parliamentary Select Committee recommended against controls on immigration. But during the 1890s, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) passed several resolutions demanding the control of Jewish immigration. In 1894 and 1898 the House of Lords approved Bills to restrict immigration, although neither of these Bills was passed by the House of Commons. In 1902 the Conservatives announced immigration control to be an element of the party’s official policy. The same year, the government established a Royal Commission on alien immigration, which in 1903 recommended limited restrictions on immigration and on immigrant residence. Finally, in 1905, Parliament passed the Aliens Immigration