

in american history who were the white ethnics

****Understanding White Ethnics in American History: Who Were They?****

in american history who were the white ethnics is a question that opens a window into the complex tapestry of cultural identity and immigration that shaped the United States. The term "white ethnics" refers to diverse groups of European descent who were often categorized separately from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority in the U.S. These groups played a significant role in shaping American society, culture, and politics, especially from the late 19th century through much of the 20th century. But who exactly were these white ethnics, and why does their story matter in understanding American history?

The Origins of White Ethnics in America

To grasp the concept of white ethnics, it's essential to understand the waves of immigration that brought millions to American shores, particularly between the 1880s and the 1920s. Unlike earlier immigrants from Western and Northern Europe—primarily England, Germany, and Scandinavia—white ethnics often hailed from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. Their countries of origin included Italy, Poland, Ireland, Greece, Hungary, and the Czech lands, among others.

Distinguishing White Ethnics from Earlier European Immigrants

Early European settlers, often referred to as the "Old Stock" Americans, were predominantly Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They held significant cultural and political influence in the U.S. However, as new immigrants arrived from Catholic, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish backgrounds, they were perceived as culturally and religiously different. This difference often led to social and economic marginalization.

White ethnics were frequently subjected to discrimination based on their accents, religious practices, customs, and even physical appearances. Their ethnic identities became a focal point for both pride within communities and a source of prejudice from the broader society.

Who Were Considered White Ethnics?

The term white ethnics broadly encompasses European immigrant groups who did not fit the Anglo-Saxon Protestant mold. Some of the most notable groups included:

- **Irish Americans:** One of the earliest and largest groups, Irish immigrants faced stereotyping and discrimination but eventually became political powerhouses in many American cities.
- **Italian Americans:** Known for their strong family networks and Catholic faith, Italians established vibrant communities despite facing harsh prejudice in the early 20th century.
- **Polish Americans:** Coming largely from rural areas, Polish immigrants brought their language and customs, contributing significantly to industrial labor forces.
- **Jewish Americans:** Many Jewish immigrants came fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe, bringing rich cultural traditions and often excelling in commerce and the arts.
- **Greek, Slovak, Hungarian, and other Central/Eastern European groups:** Each group had distinct customs and religious affiliations that further diversified the white ethnic landscape.

These groups shared a common experience of navigating a new country while maintaining ethnic traditions, often forming tight-knit neighborhoods known as ethnic enclaves.

The Social and Economic Impact of White Ethnics

White ethnics significantly influenced American cities, especially in the Northeast and Midwest. Their arrival coincided with rapid industrialization, and they often filled essential roles in factories, mines, and construction.

Labor and Urban Development

Many white ethnic communities became the backbone of urban industrial labor. Irish and Polish immigrants, for example, worked on railroads, steel mills, and in manufacturing plants. Their willingness to accept grueling working conditions helped fuel America's economic growth, yet also subjected them to exploitation and poor living standards.

Cultural Contributions

Beyond labor, white ethnics brought rich cultural traditions that enhanced America's diversity. Italian festivals, Polish churches, Jewish synagogues, and Irish parades became fixtures in American cities, influencing cuisine, music, literature, and religious life.

Political Influence and Machine Politics

In cities like New York, Chicago, and Boston, white ethnics gradually gained political power through local political machines. These organizations, often led by ethnic leaders, provided social services and jobs in exchange for political loyalty. The Irish, in particular, became synonymous with political clout, controlling city halls and police departments for decades.

Challenges Faced by White Ethnics

Despite their growing numbers and contributions, white ethnics faced significant barriers. They were often stereotyped as uneducated, unruly, or culturally inferior by the Anglo-American mainstream.

Discrimination and Assimilation Pressure

White ethnics encountered discrimination in employment, housing, and education. Many were pressured to assimilate by adopting English language and American customs, sometimes at the cost of losing their heritage languages and traditions.

Religious and Cultural Prejudice

Religious differences heightened tensions. Catholics and Jews were often targets of suspicion in a predominantly Protestant nation. Anti-Catholicism and antisemitism shaped social attitudes and policies, including restrictive immigration laws.

The Evolution of White Ethnic Identity Over Time

Over the decades, the identity of white ethnics evolved. By the mid-20th

century, many had moved out of urban enclaves into the suburbs, achieved upward economic mobility, and integrated more fully into mainstream American society.

From Marginalization to Mainstream

The children and grandchildren of white ethnics benefited from public education and expanding economic opportunities. As ethnic groups assimilated, their distinct identities blended into a broader white American identity. Yet, the legacy of white ethnics remains visible in cultural festivals, religious institutions, and family traditions.

Resurgence of Ethnic Pride

In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in ethnic roots. People proudly celebrate their white ethnic heritage through genealogy, cultural organizations, and community events, recognizing the importance of these histories in America's multicultural fabric.

Why Understanding White Ethnics Matters Today

Exploring in American history who were the white ethnics offers valuable insights into the dynamics of immigration, identity, and social change. It sheds light on how America transformed from a nation dominated by one ethnic group to a diverse society.

This history is also a reminder that "whiteness" in America has been a fluid concept, shaped by social, political, and economic forces. Groups once seen as outsiders were eventually absorbed into the mainstream, demonstrating the complexity of ethnic and racial categories.

Recognizing the stories of white ethnics helps deepen our appreciation for the struggles and contributions of immigrant communities, enriching our understanding of American identity as a constantly evolving mosaic.

The narrative of white ethnics in American history is a testament to resilience, adaptation, and cultural richness. It reminds us that beneath broad racial categories lie intricate layers of heritage and experience that continue to influence the nation today.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who were the 'white ethnics' in American history?

The 'white ethnics' in American history refer to white immigrant groups from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, such as Italians, Irish, Poles, Germans, and Jews, who were distinct from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority.

Why are white ethnics significant in American history?

White ethnics played a crucial role in shaping American urban culture, politics, labor movements, and social dynamics, especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when large waves of European immigration occurred.

Which immigrant groups are commonly classified as white ethnics?

Groups commonly classified as white ethnics include Italians, Irish, Poles, Germans, Slovaks, Czechs, Greeks, Jews, and other Central, Southern, and Eastern European immigrants.

How did white ethnics differ from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority?

White ethnics often differed in language, religion (many were Catholic, Orthodox, or Jewish), cultural traditions, and socioeconomic status, leading to social and political distinctions from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority.

What challenges did white ethnics face in America?

White ethnics often faced discrimination, economic hardship, cultural marginalization, and nativist sentiments that questioned their loyalty and ability to assimilate into mainstream American society.

How did white ethnics influence American politics?

White ethnics were influential in urban political machines, labor unions, and Democratic Party politics, particularly in cities like New York, Chicago, and Boston, where their votes and activism shaped local and national policies.

When did the term 'white ethnics' become commonly

used?

The term 'white ethnics' gained popularity in the mid-20th century to describe European immigrant groups who retained distinct cultural identities despite being classified as white in racial terms.

Did white ethnics assimilate into mainstream American culture?

Over generations, many white ethnics gradually assimilated into mainstream American culture, blending their ethnic traditions with American customs, though some aspects of their heritage remain prominent today.

What role did white ethnics play in American labor history?

White ethnics were central to the American labor movement, often working in industrial jobs and organizing unions to fight for better wages, working conditions, and rights during the industrialization era.

Are white ethnics still a relevant concept in contemporary America?

While the term 'white ethnics' is less commonly used today, the cultural legacies and identities of these immigrant groups continue to influence American society, especially in urban areas and ethnic communities.

Additional Resources

****Understanding White Ethnics in American History: Identity, Impact, and Integration****

in american history who were the white ethnics is a question that delves into the complex fabric of the United States' demographic and cultural development. The term "white ethnics" refers broadly to immigrant groups from Europe who were racially classified as white but were culturally and ethnically distinct from the dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority that shaped early American identity. These groups, including Italians, Irish, Poles, Jews, and others, played a critical role in shaping urban America, labor movements, and the nation's cultural diversity throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

This article explores the origins, characteristics, and social positioning of white ethnics in American history, highlighting their struggles for acceptance, contributions to American society, and the evolving definitions of whiteness and ethnicity.

The Origins and Definition of White Ethnics

The concept of white ethnics emerged predominantly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coinciding with waves of immigration to the United States from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. Unlike earlier immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, such as the English, Germans, and Scandinavians, these new arrivals were often Catholic, Orthodox, or Jewish, spoke non-English languages, and maintained distinct cultural traditions.

This cultural and religious difference set them apart from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority, who had established social, political, and economic dominance in the young nation. Although legally classified as white, these groups encountered significant discrimination and prejudice, revealing the fluidity of racial and ethnic categories in American society.

Who Were the White Ethnics? Key Groups and Their Characteristics

White ethnics primarily included immigrants from:

- **Irish Americans:** Arriving in large numbers during the mid-19th century, many fleeing the Great Famine, Irish immigrants were predominantly Catholic and faced fierce anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment. They settled in urban centers, often working in labor-intensive jobs.
- **Italian Americans:** Southern Italians and Sicilians arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, bringing unique dialects and Catholic traditions. They often lived in ethnic enclaves and worked in construction, manufacturing, and small businesses.
- **Polish and Eastern European Americans:** Poles, Slovaks, Czechs, and other groups from Central and Eastern Europe were mostly Catholic or Orthodox Christians. They contributed heavily to industrial labor forces in cities like Chicago and Pittsburgh.
- **Jewish Americans:** Predominantly Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe, Jewish immigrants faced religious and ethnic discrimination but established vibrant communities and contributed significantly to cultural and economic life.

These groups shared certain experiences, such as economic hardship, cultural retention, and a gradual process of assimilation and upward mobility.

Social and Political Experiences of White Ethnics

Understanding white ethnics in American history requires an analysis of their social positioning and how they navigated the dominant societal structures. Initially, white ethnics were often stigmatized as outsiders or second-class citizens due to their religion, language, and customs.

Discrimination and Integration

White ethnics faced barriers in housing, employment, and education. For example, Irish and Italian immigrants were often relegated to low-paying, physically demanding jobs. Many lived in crowded urban neighborhoods known as “ethnic enclaves,” where cultural traditions were preserved but outside prejudice persisted.

Despite these challenges, white ethnics gradually built strong community institutions like churches, schools, and social clubs that fostered cultural continuity and mutual support. Over time, particularly during the mid-20th century, many white ethnic groups began to integrate into mainstream American society, aided by:

- Participation in labor unions and political machines (notably in cities like New York and Chicago)
- Military service during World Wars that fostered a shared national identity
- Educational attainment and economic mobility

Political Influence and the Rise of Ethnic Voting Blocs

White ethnics became a powerful political force, especially in urban centers. Their collective voting patterns significantly influenced the policies of major political parties, particularly the Democratic Party, which courted

ethnic voters through patronage and social welfare programs.

The emergence of ethnic political machines, such as Tammany Hall in New York, showcased both the pros and cons of ethnic political mobilization. While these organizations provided jobs and services to immigrant communities, they were also criticized for corruption and patronage.

White Ethnics and the Evolution of Whiteness in America

The narrative of white ethnics challenges the simplistic binary of race in America and highlights the constructed nature of racial categories. When large numbers of Southern and Eastern Europeans arrived, they were not immediately accepted as fully “white” in the social sense. Over decades, however, the boundaries of whiteness expanded to include these groups, fundamentally altering American racial dynamics.

Shifts in Ethnic Identity

As white ethnics assimilated, many downplayed their distinct ethnic identities to gain social acceptance. Inter marriage, language shift, and participation in mainstream culture contributed to this process. However, ethnic heritage remained a source of pride and cultural richness, influencing American cuisine, music, and traditions.

The Role of Socioeconomic Mobility

Economic advancement was critical to the inclusion of white ethnics within the broader category of whiteness. As second and third-generation white ethnics attained middle-class status, they gained access to suburban housing, better education, and political power, thus solidifying their position in American society.

White Ethnics Compared to Other Immigrant Groups

It is useful to compare white ethnics to other immigrant groups to understand

their unique position in American history.

- **Compared to Anglo-Saxon Protestants:** White ethnics were initially marginalized due to religion and culture but shared racial classification, allowing eventual assimilation.
- **Compared to African Americans and other racial minorities:** White ethnics experienced discrimination but benefited from white privilege, which facilitated their upward mobility.
- **Compared to more recent immigrant groups:** White ethnics paved the way for later waves of immigrants in terms of labor participation and community organization, although each group faced distinct challenges.

The story of white ethnics in American history is a vital chapter in understanding the complexities of identity, race, and assimilation in the United States. Their experiences reveal the interplay of ethnicity, religion, and class in shaping social hierarchies and political power. As the country continues to evolve demographically, the legacy of white ethnics underscores the dynamic nature of American identity and the ongoing negotiation between cultural heritage and integration.

In American History Who Were The White Ethnics

in american history who were the white ethnics: *The Ethnic Dimension in American History* James S. Olson, Heather Olson Beal, 2011-09-07 The Ethnic Dimension in American History is a thorough survey of the role that ethnicity has played in shaping the history of the United States. Considering ethnicity in terms of race, language, religion and national origin, this important text examines its effects on social relations, public policy and economic development. A thorough survey of the role that ethnicity has played in shaping the history of the United States, including the effects of ethnicity on social relations, public policy and economic development Includes histories of a wide range of ethnic groups including African Americans, Native Americans, Jews, Chinese, Europeans, Japanese, Muslims, Koreans, and Latinos Examines the interaction of ethnic groups with one another and the dynamic processes of acculturation, modernization, and assimilation; as well as the history of immigration Revised and updated material in the fourth edition reflects current thinking and recent history, bringing the story up to the present and including the impact of 9/11

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American-born second generation of individuals with loose ties to the land of their parents contributed to bring together Italian Americans from disparate local backgrounds and helped them to develop a common national identity that they had lacked upon arrival in the United States. Luconi explains how Italian Americans continued to distance themselves from other European minorities throughout the early postwar years until ethnic defensiveness against the alleged encroachments of African Americans as well as racial tensions over housing forced them to extend the boundaries of their ethnic identity in the 1960s and to redefine it within the broader context of the white ethnic movement. This process climaxed as Philadelphia polarized along racial lines on issues such as public education and crime in the late 1960s and a

in american history who were the white ethnics: Beyond White Ethnicity Kathleen J. Fitzgerald, 2007-01-01 Through qualitative analysis of individuals, Kathleen J. Fitzgerald studies the social construction of racial and ethnic identity in *Beyond White Ethnicity*. Fitzgerald focuses on Native Americans, who despite a previously unacknowledged and uncelebrated background, are embracing and reclaiming their heritage in their everyday lives. Focusing on the purpose, process, and problems of this reclamation, Fitzgerald's research provides an understanding of these issues. She also exposes how institutional power relations are racialized and how race is a social and political construction, and she helps us understand larger cultural transformations. This insightful collection of research sparks the interest of those who study sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies.

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in american history who were the white ethnics: *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* Timothy J. Meagher, 2005-09-14 Once seen as threats to mainstream society, Irish Americans have become an integral part of the American story. More than 40 million Americans claim Irish descent, and the culture and traditions of Ireland and Irish Americans have left an indelible mark on U.S. society. Timothy J. Meagher fuses an overview of Irish American history with an analysis of historians' debates, an annotated bibliography, a chronology of critical events, and a glossary discussing crucial individuals, organizations, and dates. He addresses a range of key issues in Irish American history from the first Irish settlements in the seventeenth century through the famine years in the nineteenth century to the volatility of 1960s America and beyond. The result is a definitive guide to understanding the complexities and paradoxes that have defined the Irish American experience. Throughout the work, Meagher invokes comparisons to Irish experiences in Canada, Britain, and Australia to challenge common perceptions of Irish American history. He examines the shifting patterns of Irish migration, discusses the role of the Catholic church in the Irish immigrant experience, and considers the Irish American influence in U.S. politics and modern urban popular culture. Meagher pays special attention to Irish American families and the roles of

men and women, the emergence of the Irish as a governing class in American politics, the paradox of their combination of fervent American patriotism and passionate Irish nationalism, and their complex and sometimes tragic relations with African and Asian Americans.

in american history who were the white ethnics: White Ethnic New York Joshua M. Zeitz, 2011-09-01 Historians of postwar American politics often identify race as a driving force in the dynamically shifting political culture. Joshua Zeitz instead places religion and ethnicity at the fore, arguing that ethnic conflict among Irish Catholics, Italian Catholics, and Jews in New York City had a decisive impact on the shape of liberal politics long before black-white racial identity politics entered the political lexicon. Understanding ethnicity as an intersection of class, national origins, and religion, Zeitz demonstrates that the white ethnic populations of New York had significantly diverging views on authority and dissent, community and individuality, secularism and spirituality, and obligation and entitlement. New York Jews came from Eastern European traditions that valued dissent and encouraged political agitation; their Irish and Italian Catholic neighbors tended to value commitment to order, deference to authority, and allegiance to church and community. Zeitz argues that these distinctions ultimately helped fracture the liberal coalition of the Roosevelt era, as many Catholics bolted a Democratic Party increasingly focused on individual liberties, and many dissent-minded Jews moved on to the antiliberal New Left.

in american history who were the white ethnics: Art Rebels Paul Lopes, 2019-06-11 How creative freedom, race, class, and gender shaped the rebellion of two visionary artists Postwar America experienced an unprecedented flourishing of avant-garde and independent art. Across the arts, artists rebelled against traditional conventions, embracing a commitment to creative autonomy and personal vision never before witnessed in the United States. Paul Lopes calls this the Heroic Age of American Art, and identifies two artists—Miles Davis and Martin Scorsese—as two of its leading icons. In this compelling book, Lopes tells the story of how a pair of talented and outspoken art rebels defied prevailing conventions to elevate American jazz and film to unimagined critical heights. During the Heroic Age of American Art—where creative independence and the unrelenting pressures of success were constantly at odds—Davis and Scorsese became influential figures with such modern classics as *Kind of Blue* and *Raging Bull*. Their careers also reflected the conflicting ideals of, and contentious debates concerning, avant-garde and independent art during this period. In examining their art and public stories, Lopes also shows how their rebellions as artists were intimately linked to their racial and ethnic identities and how both artists adopted hypermasculine ideologies that exposed the problematic intersection of gender with their racial and ethnic identities as iconic art rebels. *Art Rebels* is the essential account of a new breed of artists who left an indelible mark on American culture in the second half of the twentieth century. It is an unforgettable portrait of two iconic artists who exemplified the complex interplay of the quest for artistic autonomy and the expression of social identity during the Heroic Age of American Art.

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in american history who were the white ethnics: Contours of White Ethnicity Yiorgos Anagnostou, 2009-11-15 In *Contours of White Ethnicity*, Yiorgos Anagnostou explores the construction of ethnic history and reveals how and why white ethnics selectively retain, rework, or reject their pasts. Challenging the tendency to portray Americans of European background as a uniform cultural category, the author demonstrates how a generalized view of American white ethnics misses the specific identity issues of particular groups as well as their internal differences. Interdisciplinary in scope, *Contours of White Ethnicity* uses the example of Greek America to illustrate how the immigrant past can be used to combat racism and be used to bring about solidarity between white ethnics and racial minorities. Illuminating the importance of the past in the construction of ethnic identities today, Anagnostou presents the politics of evoking the past to create community, affirm identity, and nourish reconnection with ancestral roots, then identifies the struggles to neutralize oppressive pasts. Although it draws from the scholarship on a specific ethnic group, *Contours of White Ethnicity* exhibits a sophisticated, interdisciplinary methodology, which

makes it of particular interest to scholars researching ethnicity and race in the United States and for those charting the directions of future research for white ethnicities.

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in american history who were the white ethnics: *White Voters in 21st Century America* George Hawley, 2014-08-21 The United States is experiencing remarkable demographic changes that are having an important impact on the American electorate. As the minority share of the voting-eligible population continues to grow, the political clout of non-Hispanic whites will further decline. The 2012 election demonstrated that the Democratic Party can secure an Electoral College victory even when it loses badly, in the aggregate, among non-Hispanic whites. This does not mean that white voters are unimportant, however. The political behavior of whites in the decades ahead will largely determine the direction of American politics. This book examines the political behavior of non-Hispanic whites. It considers the trends within the white vote, how white voters differ geographically, and the primary fault lines among white voters. It also examines how white political behavior changes in response to diversity. It considers whether or not the day is approaching when whites consolidate into a largely homogenous voting bloc, or whether whites will remain politically heterogeneous in the decades ahead. Whereas other books have examined the political behavior of specific social classes within the non-Hispanic white community (working class whites, for example), this is the first book to examine whites as a whole, and provide a useful summary of recent trends within this group and thoughtful speculation about its future.

in american history who were the white ethnics: *The Minority Rights Revolution* John David

Skrentny, 2009-06-30 In the wake of the black civil rights movement, other disadvantaged groups of Americans began to make headway--Latinos, women, Asian Americans, and the disabled found themselves the beneficiaries of new laws and policies--and by the early 1970s a minority rights revolution was well underway. In the first book to take a broad perspective on this wide-ranging and far-reaching phenomenon, John D. Skrentny exposes the connections between the diverse actions and circumstances that contributed to this revolution--and that forever changed the face of American politics. Though protest and lobbying played a role in bringing about new laws and regulations--touching everything from wheelchair access to women's athletics to bilingual education--what Skrentny describes was not primarily a bottom-up story of radical confrontation. Rather, elites often led the way, and some of the most prominent advocates for expanding civil rights were the conservative Republicans who later emerged as these policies' most vociferous opponents. This book traces the minority rights revolution back to its roots not only in the black civil rights movement but in the aftermath of World War II, in which a world consensus on equal rights emerged from the Allies' triumph over the oppressive regimes of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and then the Soviet Union. It also contrasts failed minority rights development for white ethnics and gays/lesbians with groups the government successfully categorized with African Americans. Investigating these links, Skrentny is able to present the world as America's leaders saw it; and so, to show how and why familiar figures--such as Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and, remarkably enough, conservatives like Senator Barry Goldwater and Robert Bork--created and advanced policies that have made the country more egalitarian but left it perhaps as divided as ever.

in american history who were the white ethnics: Catholics in the Movies Colleen McDannell, 2007-12-24 Catholicism was all over movie screens in 2004. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was at the center of a media firestorm for months. A priest was a crucial character in the Academy Award-winning *Million Dollar Baby*. Everyone, it seemed, was talking about how religious stories should be represented, marketed, and received. Catholic characters, spaces, and rituals have been stock features in popular films since the silent era. An intensely visual religion with a well-defined ritual and authority system, Catholicism lends itself to the drama and pageantry of film. Moviegoers watch as Catholic visionaries interact with the supernatural, priests counsel their flocks, reformers fight for social justice, and bishops wield authoritarian power. Rather than being marginal to American popular culture, Catholic people, places, and rituals are all central to the world of the movie. *Catholics in the Movies* begins with an introductory essay that orients readers to the ways that films appear in culture and describes the broad trends that can be seen in the movies' hundred-year history of representing Catholics. Each chapter is written by a noted scholar of American religion who concentrates on one movie engaging important historical, artistic, and religious issues. Each then places the film within American cultural and social history, discusses the film as an expression of Catholic concerns of the period, and relates the film to others of its genre. Tracing the story of American Catholic history through popular films, *Catholics in the Movies* should be a valuable resource for anyone interested in American Catholicism and religion and film.

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Symcox traces the genealogy of the National History Standards Project from its origins as a neo-conservative reform movement to the drafting of the Standards, through the 18 months of controversy and the debate that ensued, and the aftermath. Broad in scope, this case study includes debates on social history, world history, multiculturalism, established canons, national identity, cultural history, and liberal education. Symcox brilliantly illuminates the larger issue of how educational policy is made and contested in the United States, revealing how a debate about our children's education actually became a struggle between competing political forces.

in american history who were the white ethnics: The Columbia Documentary History of Race and Ethnicity in America Ronald H. Bayor, 2004 With more than 240 primary sources, this introduction to a complex topic is a resource for student research.

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