

Knowledge Map: USA 1910 – 1929 3. Crime and Corruption

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Summary: | This section of the subject continues to deal with the idea that the 1920s were not ‘roaring’ for all. It explores the period of Prohibition (where alcohol was illegal), it requires us to look at the reasons Prohibition was introduced and how far the aims of it were achieved. It shows prohibition leading to corruption and violence in the cities of the USA, at the hands of gangsters; in some cases whole cities were controlled by them. However not only did people see cases of corruption in the cities, they also saw it in the federal government under the presidency of Warren Harding. The feeling grew that morals had deteriorated in the USA and that many people were prepared to break the law. |
|-----------------|---|

Reasons for Prohibition

Summary

During the 19th Century there had been many groups in the USA who had supported the idea of prohibiting the sale of alcohol. Momentum had been building up with the issue and in 1919 the manufacture, sale and transportation of alcohol was banned.

Key knowledge

| | | |
|----|---|--|
| 1. | The Volstead Act | The 18 th Amendment of the American Constitution which was the complete ban on the manufacture, sale and transportation of alcohol. Passed in Congress in 1919 and in place from 1920. |
| 2. | 1906 - 1929 | Between these years 26 states in the USA passed laws to limit the sale of alcohol. These were mainly in the South and West. In addition to this many other states were divided into ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ districts. |
| 3. | The Women’s Christian Temperance Union | Temperance is an anti – alcohol movement. They believed that alcohol was the root of sin and evil; they argued there were clear links between the consumption of alcohol and domestic abuse. |
| 4. | The Anti – Saloon League | Also saw alcohol as the root of sin and evil. Believed Prohibition would strengthen the traditional values of the American people. Printed anti drinking leaflets, lobbied businessmen and Congressmen. |
| 5. | First World War | Many brewers were of German origin and when the USA declared war on Germany in 1917 many argued the sale and consumption of alcohol was unpatriotic. |

Life under Prohibition

Summary

Prohibition had been intended to bring about “a new era of clear thinking and clean living”; increase worker’s productivity; reduce crime and violence; and improve people’s health. However it simply drove drinkers and drinking underground leading to a huge increase in organised crime.

Key knowledge

| | | |
|----|--------------------|---|
| 6. | Smuggling | People could smuggle alcohol in from Europe, Mexico, Canada and the Caribbean. The USA had more than 30,000 km of coastline and land borders to guard, and so it was difficult to stop. |
| 7. | Bootlegging | Bootleggers were people who illegally made and sold alcohol. The illegal alcohol they made and sold was known as moonshine and was often poorly made. |
| 8. | Speakeasies | Speakeasies were illegal bars where people could go to get alcohol. |
| 9. | Health | Deaths from alcoholism fell by 80% however by about 1926 about 50,000 people had died from poisoned alcohol. |

| | | |
|-----|--------------------|---|
| 10. | Enforcement | Prohibition was enforced by prohibition agents . However there were never more than 2,500 agents for the whole country making it impossible. Many prohibition agents were corrupt and accepted bribes from gangsters. Most Americans were prepared to break the prohibition law. |
|-----|--------------------|---|

Organised Crime

Summary

There were criminal gangs before Prohibition but the 1920s saw a growth in their power.

Key knowledge

| | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---|
| 11. | Gangsters | Organised gangs of criminals established themselves to supply and distribute alcohol. When faced with competition they would violently ‘takeover’ their rivals. |
| 12. | Al Capone | His links to the crook Johnny Torrio led him to work his way up to become the Mob boss for the whole of Chicago. He had more than 200 of his rivals killed from 1925 – 1929. |
| 13. | St. Valentine’s Day Massacre | On 14 February 1929 Capone’s gang (dressed as policemen) gunned down 7 members of the rival Moran gang. This horrified the people of Chicago and made them realise gangsters weren’t glamorous. |

Corruption

Summary

Just as there were examples of corruption in towns and cities there were examples of corruption in the government.

Key knowledge

| | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|--|
| 14. | Warren Harding | Republican. Elected president in 1920 after promising a return to ‘normalcy’ |
| 15. | The Ohio Gang | Harding’s cabinet, made up of his friends and colleagues, many of whom were from Ohio. Number of them used their position for their own financial gain. |
| 16. | Tea Pot Dome Scandal | Albert Fall (a key member of Harding’s cabinet) leased government oil fields (which were supposed to be specifically for the navy) to his wealthy friends in exchange for huge bribes. |

Key words

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Prohibition | Making the manufacture, sale and transportation of alcohol illegal. |
| Wet | Areas where alcohol was legal. |
| Dry | Prohibiting the sale or consumption of alcohol. |
| Corruption | Abuse of a government position for personal gain. |