

## The “Other” Americans in Europe

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### ABSTRACT

Americans in Europe were not limited to the well-known artists and writers. Understanding the role of Americans in Europe calls for a long periodization and a broad range of occupations from the nineteenth century onward. Even during the iconic decade of Paris in the 1920s, approximately nine-tenths of Americans living in the city were not writers or artists but industrialists, bankers, and rentiers, or more modest librarians and sales representatives. They could all nevertheless be considered “elites” compared to the other immigrant workers who began to circulate in Europe beginning in the nineteenth century (Italians or Poles in France, for example). Furthermore, Americans from the United States were not the only elite travelers or elite “Americans” in Europe during the twentieth century.



[Illustration: painting by J. Béraud]

After the Service at Holy Trinity Church (later the American Cathedral of Paris), Jean Béraud, circa 1900, Paris, Musée Carnavalet. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Businessmen, countesses, wayward youth: Americans in Europe were not limited to the well-known artists and writers such as T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Henry James (1843-1916) in England, or Edith Wharton (1862-1937), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961), and James Baldwin (1924-1987) in France. The debates surrounding the “Americanization” of Europe date further back than the Marshall Plan: understanding the role of Americans in Europe calls for a longer periodization and a broader range of prospects and occupations from the nineteenth century onward. Even during the iconic decade of the 1920s in Paris, approximately nine-tenths of Americans living in Paris were not writers or artists but industrialists, bankers, and rentiers, or more modest librarians and sales representatives. They could all nevertheless be considered “elites” compared to the other migrants who began to circulate in Europe beginning in the nineteenth century (Italians or Poles in France, for example). Americans from the United States were not the only elite travelers or elite “Americans” in Europe during the twentieth century, as Russian, British, and Italian aristocrats crossed paths with North and South Americans in the salons of London and Paris.

### **From the “Grand Tour” to Investing in Europe**

From the very beginnings of the United States, Americans began to cross the Atlantic from west to east, in the opposite direction from the pioneers of the distant past. During the nineteenth century, diplomats and other elites made the Grand Tour (as European youths had been doing since the seventeenth century), prompting young men and women to discover the origins of European culture. While European emigration toward the United States, which consisted of peasant and laborers, had been in full swing since the mid-nineteenth century, a small flow of Americans was travelling in the opposite direction. As the steamboat shortened the crossing from one month to twelve days, the movement accelerated and became more democratic at the end of the century, enabling the middle classes and an increasing number of single women to discover Europe.

Indeed, women and men had different migration patterns. At the turn of the twentieth century, American women from high-society stood out in particular. As the heiresses of industrial fortunes, they sometimes married penniless European nobles. The exchange of money and titles sparked debate, while the wives were sometimes mocked as so many “Spaghetti countesses”: how could good democrats share their wealth with the old European aristocracy? However, most newcomers to Europe did not have independent means. They worked. They were doctors, jurists, industrialists, sales representatives of machine, pants manufacturers along with librarians and teachers. The men came to do business, seeking to export American “modernity.”

However, the increasing number of American tourists and residents in Europe beginning in the late nineteenth century does not alone explain the debates regarding Europe’s Americanization, which also began in the nineteenth century. In 1860, the London Times lamented that “this Americanization is represented to us as the greatest of calamities,” while the Goncourt brothers worried, as early as the International Exposition of 1867, about “industry prevailing over art, the steam thresher whittling down painting’s pride.” The United States began to show its industrial and military might. Three years after the Spanish-American War (1898), which awakened fears of American imperialism, the English journalist William Stead published *The Americanization of the World* (1901, translated into French and German the following year).

American banks, lawyers, and accountants settled in Europe beginning in the nineteenth century, accompanying the first industrialists who brought new machines such as cash

registers, sewing machines, and steam threshers. Paris was the capital of European business. American Express opened its first European office there in 1895. The first American chamber of commerce abroad was founded there in 1894. It aimed not only to advocate for American companies in France, but to also “champion Americanism in Europe.”

### **Europe’s American Moment during the Interwar Period**

World War One accelerated the movement. Following in the steps of National Cash Register, Singer, and International Harvester, other investors and manufacturers saw the post-World War One period as an opportune moment to establish themselves in Europe, whether it was to sell plumbing equipment or dry biscuits. The Seligman, Drexel, and Harjes banks, and later Morgan, Harjes & Co., were already established in France since the nineteenth century, but the war scopes expanded their importance, especially that of Morgan. Managers, industrialists, trade representatives, lawyers, and other American bankers accompanied this movement, settling in Europe to promote and pursue their business. Women were not to be outdone, working as purchasers for American department stores and photographers/publicists (notably Thérèse Bonney [1894-1978]); opening their own shoe company, bookstore (Sylvia Beach [1887-1962]), or travel agency; and even more unusually sometimes serving as representatives for machine tool manufacturers (Mrs. H.E. Seemuller).

The interwar period paved the way for the subsequent establishment of other businesses, although life for the Americans of Paris was not easy during the 1930s. Widespread xenophobia was on the rise, including a brief boycott of American products, and a mini-riot in 1926 aimed essentially at tourists deemed to be “*gens du dollar*” (people of the dollar). The new regulations for identification papers brought out a certain number of “undocumented” Americans from the woodwork, who had thought they did not need to have their papers entirely in order in France. The creation of a new *carte de commerçant* (business permit) in 1938 affected industrialists as well.

### **The Americanization of Europe in the Aftermath of World War Two**

Then came the war. Americans took their consulates by storm. Many of those living in Europe returned home, but left their belongings in storage in order to return after the war. This left traces in the archives, which give an idea of their well-to-do social backgrounds, with long lists of furniture, silverware, etc.

American life in Europe resumed after the war. A new wave of writers (Richard Wright [1908-1960], James Baldwin [1924-1987]) moved to the Left Bank of Paris, while the Right Bank became the neighborhood of predilection for wealthier Americans, which is still true even today. Americans increasingly moved to London as it rose in financial power, while the move toward Berlin began due to the U.S. military bases there. The debates surrounding Americanization resumed in France, while businessmen, law offices, bankers, and professional purchasers crisscrossed the capital, bringing life to the American community’s institutions in Paris: the American Students’ and Artists’ Center (until 1996), the American Cathedral, the American Church, the American Hospital, the American Library, and the American Chamber of Commerce. The new business hub of Frankfurt also became a choice location for economic elites.

Statistics regarding Americans outside of their country remain approximate, as there is no

obligation for citizens living abroad to register as such. In 2016, the State Department alluded to some 9 million citizens living abroad, with the vast majority being in the two bordering countries (Mexico, Canada), but also India, the Philippines, Israel, Costa Rica, and South Korea. In Europe, an estimated 140,000-190,000 Americans live in England, 100,000 in each of France and Germany, and over 50,000 in Italy.

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