

Home » Publications » E-seminars in history

Naturalisations In France, 1927-1939: The Example Of The Alpes De Haute Provence (Formerly The Basses-Alpes)

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Over the course of the last twenty years more and more research, both national and regional, has begun to appear on the subject of immigration in France. Immigration has, to an extent, been transformed from a strangely neglected subject to a key contemporary issue. In the inter-war period which I have been studying, the number of foreign nationals residing long term in France doubled, rising from 1,532,000 (or 3.9% of the population) in 1921, to around 3,000,000 (or 7% of the total population) by 1930. [1] Such a tidal wave of migrant labour undoubtedly had a crucial role to play in the development of France in the interwar period and as such has certainly deserved the study undertaken by numerous historians. Equally, within a subject so vast, room still remains for further studies, both regional and national.

However, in looking at the subject it seemed to me that, while much recent attention has been devoted to immigration 'per se', very little research has been conducted into that group of immigrants who chose to make their pact with France permanent, via the process of naturalisation. This is perhaps somewhat puzzling, especially considering that while other, more technical, aspects of immigration were mainly of interest only to specialists, naturalisation aroused much discussion and debate within the wider public at the time. The only notable exception to this general lacuna seems to be the work of Charles Bonnet, particularly his study of naturalisation in the department of the Rhone, conducted 20 years ago now. [2]

Why more such research has not been undertaken seems to have been an anomaly of chance. I don't think that research into the arena of naturalisation can be of only peripheral or marginal interest. In a book published only last year, Rogers Brubaker highlighted how, 'debates about the citizenship status of immigrants remain in large part debates about nationhood - about what it means and what it ought to mean, to belong to a nation state'. [3] It seems probable then that by looking at official attitudes towards immigrants applying for citizenship, we can tell a lot about the way these officials viewed both France as a nation and their own French citizenship.

I have taken as my start date the year 1927. In August of this year new legislation concerning naturalisation became law. Up until then, French naturalisation regulations were what US researcher Gary Cross has described as, 'hardly an encouragement for assimilation'. [4] This legal code, dating back to 1889, was indeed fairly restrictive. For example, 10 years of uninterrupted residency in France was required prior to any application. The theoretical basis behind this was that naturalisation would only be accorded at the culmination of assimilation, as recognition that complete integration had taken place. However along with increasing immigration, the period following the first world war saw an intensification in the demand for French citizenship. Via legislation passed in 1927 the role of naturalisation within France began to change. Rather than merely the legal recognition of complete assimilation, naturalisation became perceived as a device to help fix the most desirable foreign elements permanently in France. Thus the legislation of 1927 was not just an addition or modification to the prior legislation, it was a radical alteration undertaken to create a new, more liberal system 'in which the two types of assimilation, under law and within society, could take place in parallel, rather than the one following the other'.

A key factor influencing this legislative change was a widespread fear of demographic stagnation in the wake of WW1. Many in France were concerned about population decline and its perceived consequences; which they saw as a lack of military strength, declining manufacturing base and loss of general national prestige. A general drift from countryside to towns and a decline in the birth rate, coupled with the loss of vast swathes of manpower during the war meant that, by the 1920s, the French population was in danger of stagnation. This trend was particularly pronounced in France as the death rate was slower to fall here than elsewhere.

The theme of depopulation was referred to again and again in the literature of the period. Alarmist predictions were made about how, if the birth rate continued to fall, the French population would be less than 29,000,000 by 1985. Constant comparisons were also made between France and Germany. Charles Lambert (co- author of the 1927 legislation) noted how the French population grew by only 60,000 in 1925, compared to an increase of over half a million in Germany. Although declining birth rates were common throughout Europe this seemed largely academic to an anxious French population. As one journal *La Reforme Sociale* put it, 'The optimists tell us that other countries are having the same problems as us, but what about Germany,....which has a continually increasing birth rate. It won't be long before our enemies have put an unbridgeable distance between them and us'. [5] The *Petit Parisien*, put it even more bluntly in 1938, stating 'To accept a declining birth rate is to accept war, war and defeat'. If France alone could not produce a sufficient population, many felt there was clearly a need to look elsewhere.

The proposed reform of naturalisation legislation thus had an emotive history. The first outline was accepted by the senate as early as 1922, but was subsequently modified and shuffled between the chambers several times. Throughout this period of hesitation, the numbers of immigrants applying for naturalisation grew, probably influenced by the decision of the United States in May 1924 to impose strict immigration quotas limiting access to this traditionally open refuge. The final draft of the new naturalisation legislation was submitted to the chambers and became law on the 10th August 1927.

The new law contained important modifications designed to facilitate the dual processes of assimilation and integration. Two key alterations applied to the 'condition de capacite' and the 'condition de stage'. With regards to capacite, the law now applied to all those over 18, a reduction from the prior age of 21. This had the effect of increasing the population eligible for national service. The 'condition de stage', which had previously been either 10 years residency was drastically reduced. All that was now required was 3 years uninterrupted residency in France. It was this reduction in the residency qualification which had the most dramatic effect. Figures for 1927, with the legislation in force for only 4 clear months, show the rate of naturalisation at over 30,000, almost triple that of the previous year, itself a maximum.

Reactions to the new legislation were mixed. The left felt it would help to regenerate depopulated areas and breakdown foreign enclaves within France, although caution was advised in the selection procedure. The right was not so charitable. Action Francaise, the right wing daily coined the phrase 'Francais-papier' and warned against the inflation of French nationality. Columnist Francois Coty warned that 'The new nationality legislation....puts the whole French nation under a death sentence'. Nevertheless, the late 1920s and the 1930s witnessed a massive increase in the number of successful naturalisations. Chart 1 tracks the yearly national rate of naturalisations from the turn of the century, past the legislation of 1927 and on to 1940. Chart 2 shows comparable data for the Basses Alpes.

As you can see, the rate of naturalisation remained at a stable, fairly low level until the First World War. After stopping completely between 1914 and 1918, a slow increase began. The first big surge of applications came in 1927. Naturalisations then stabilised, to an extent, at a far higher level than prior to 1927. The level peaked in 1939 with a frenzy of last minute recruitment, tailed off in 1940 and then ceased for the duration of the Second World War. Indeed, from July 1940 all naturalisations accorded since 1927 could be reviewed and revoked. The exact extent of this process is unclear but numerous dossiers were re-surveyed. Clearly 1940 marks the end of the naturalisation boom. The Basses Alpes had a higher rate of naturalisation per capita of foreign population than most other departments, naturalising 10% of its foreign population in the late 1920s, but nevertheless it would seem that comparable figures for the department tally extremely well with the national picture.^[6]

Obviously it would be misleading to attribute this huge increase entirely to the legislative change. Other factors, for example, the boost to industry and manufacturing given by the First World War, meant that both immigration and applications for naturalisation were increasing throughout the 1920s. Nevertheless, the streamlining and reorganisation of the naturalisation procedure in 1927 was undoubtedly a key factor in augmenting the trend. As Gary Cross puts it, 'the revised law seemed to be serving its purpose of integrating more foreigners into French life and of increasing the French population'.^[7]

Given this background, perhaps the first question to ask is who were these people, and also, why specifically did they want to become French? Fortunately, as a by-product of the extensive paperwork involved in an application for naturalisation, answers are more readily available here than in other, less regulated aspects of immigration. Also, it is likely that the details available are accurate as information concerning date and place of birth, marital status and profession all had to be substantiated by documentary evidence.

By the late twenties, France been subject to sustained and permanent, large-scale immigration for at least a decade. As would be expected with over a million and a half foreigners resident on French soil, representatives of almost any given nationality could be found. However, four key nationalities can be highlighted: Italians, Poles, Spaniards and Belgians. All were present in significant proportions, far beyond that of the other nationalities. Although these figures were subject to fluctuation over time the Italian population was always the most numerically superior. The Polish contingent rose to take second place by 1930. The Spaniards remained fairly constant while the Belgian share had declined from the early 1920s to relegate them to fourth place by 1932.

At a national level, patterns of naturalisation largely reflected these same divisions and trends. Again, the four nations most heavily represented were, unsurprisingly, Italy, Spain, Poland and Belgium. Levels and fluctuations over the period in question can be seen in Chart 2. As was the case with immigration in general, Italians were by far the most numerous applicants for naturalisation. The Bureau for Population Statistics noted how, 'Since 1893, Italians have constantly provided the highest number of naturalises...the proportion of naturalisations provided by Italy has always been between 30 and 40%'. Throughout the period 1927-1940 Italians were always the most numerous, continually accounting for more than 40% of naturalisations and even forming more than 50% between 1931 and 1934, and also again in 1939 and 1940. Although in second place in 1927, the numbers of Belgians applying for naturalisation fell steadily, only forming 4% in 1940. Spain accounted for more than 10% of naturalisations for the first time in June 1927 and held these levels, even reaching 16% in 1940, perhaps under the impetus of the Civil War. The Polish contingent grew steadily until 1933, when it assumed second place. Other nationalities lagged far behind. The next closest were the Russians and the Swiss, but these only naturalised hundreds of their emigrants, compared to the thousands and tens of thousands of this top four.

The predominance of certain nationalities is also seen in the regional figures for the Basses Alpes. The supremacy of the Italians is clearly seen and is in fact markedly exaggerated, probably by the proximity of the region to the Italian border. A strong Spanish presence was evident. Poles and Belgians were less numerous than the national average but this can probably be attributed to the distance to these more northern countries.

There are a number of possible reasons why we should expect to find the statistics outlined here; namely four nations (Italy, Spain, Belgium and Poland) accounting for the vast majority of naturalisations, with all other nations trailing far behind. Firstly, and most obviously, it was a question of geography. A glance at the map shows that three of these countries have significant land borders with France. Given the demographic osmosis continually taking place in such regions it is entirely unsurprising to find a surfeit of naturalisations taken from these nationalities.

Government immigration policy in the post war reconstruction period may also have impacted upon naturalisation. No unified political solution was enacted but individual government ministries aided the sectors of industry within the scope of their powers. For example, 'access to especially prized nationalities, such as Italians and Poles...' was facilitated by a series of bi-lateral treaties signed with these governments 'to ensure a regular flow of immigrant labour'.^[8] It seems likely that government policy in the wake of the First World War encouraged, and even actively recruited, long-term immigration from the four nations which were later to supply the bulk of naturalises. A high proportion of applicants for naturalisation in the Basses-Alpes during the 1930s cited the fact that they had a close relative already living in France as one of their reasons for choosing France as their final destination. Given this, it can perhaps be hypothesised that government policy in the post war period helped configure certain channels of migration, which in turn would prefigure patterns of naturalisation in the later 1920s and 1930s, when French citizenship became more readily available.

A supplementary factor in the predominance of certain nationalities in applications for naturalisation may have concerned the attitudes of the French officials involved. Without full details of the applications which were rejected (these were generally not preserved) these attitudes are hard to evaluate precisely but it certainly seems likely that officials, perceived applicants of certain nationalities as more easily assimilable than others. Theories concerning the integration quotient of specific 'sister races' were certainly prevalent at the time. One author, Georges Mauco, for instance, noted that 'The rhythm of naturalisation is particularly quick among immigrants from neighbouring countries with whom assimilation is easy. It slows considerably in relation to applicants from further away, more different in all aspects'.^[9] Even Charles Lambert, perhaps the chief exponent of the liberalisation of naturalisation, wrote that 'without being hostile, in principle, to the assimilation of Asians and Africans...this mixture isn't really desirable'. Whereas, 'The Spanish, the Italians and the Belgians are easily assimilable and make excellent recruits'.^[10] Similarly, in 1931, a sub-prefect of the Basses Alpes wrote in a report to the prefect that he considered that 'Those individuals who come from the north of Italy are in the great majority of cases excellent recruits...Speaking French and the provencal dialect perfectly and already having a racial affinity with the population of this country they are easily and quickly assimilated'.^[11] Now, he may have had a point, but the attitudes of public officials towards applicants from less favoured nationalities were often in contradiction to the proud ideas of universal assimilation espoused in 1927. Certainly, it seems that officials felt that the qualities required for French citizenship could be found more commonly in their neighbours than further afield.

Given this brief survey of nationality, family demographics would appear to be the next relevant category of information. Did French naturalisation policy seek to recruit strong young bachelor workers or older, more established family units? In the case of the Basses Alpes, the answer is both. However, the majority of applicants, 59%, were married. Of this 59% around a third, or a fifth of all candidates for naturalisation had married a Frenchwoman.^[12] The average age for married applicants was 41 and for bachelors was 26. The full demographic split by age at naturalisation can be seen in Chart 4.

It can be clearly seen that while the 20-25 age group held the largest percentage share, at just over a quarter, no group was favoured exclusively. In fact, naturalisation in the Basses Alpes appears to have featured no single, 'average type'. Rather, two average types seem to present themselves. The first figure is that of a bachelor, young, in his mid 20s to early 30s, and fit for military service. The second average type was older, often over 40, married and also with children. Of all married applicants, only 3 had no children. Partly no doubt this was not unusual in that era, but it is also likely that this reflects a desire on the part of officials to ensure that if the candidate himself was past the age for military service, his children at least would still be eligible. Interestingly, the

small size of the 26-30 age range may have been due to the fact that the upper age limit for military service was 30. Candidates nearing this age may have decided to delay their application for a few years to side-step this requirement.

One point that should be noted here is that, regardless of the age of the applicant, and despite the fact that the residency qualification had been reduced to 3 years, almost all applicants were, in fact, very long term residents. In the Basses Alpes the average time spent in France prior to an application for citizenship was over 15 years. These figures are somewhat surprising. Although the residency qualification had been reduced to 3 years, almost 70% of applicants could have applied under the old 10 year terms. Naturalisation, therefore, seems to have been almost exclusively the domain of the longest established immigrants. It is impossible to say with certainty whether this was because more recent migrants simply didn't apply, or whether they did but were rejected by French officials seeking a high level of integration before granting citizenship. A combination of both would seem to be the most likely probable cause.

Given that the average age for bachelor applicants was 26 and that the average length of residency prior to application was over 15 years, it is obvious that many single applicants had come to France with their parents as children and had stayed to make a life there. This theory is largely born out by the documentary evidence where over a third of applicants, when questioned concerning their arrival in France replied 'I was brought to France as a child by my parents', or some similar formulation.

Aside from this, economic factors were perhaps the crucial motivating factor in drawing foreigners to France. When asked on application 'Why did you leave the country where you were born', many referred to the hardship and unemployment rife in Italy and elsewhere at the time. Responses such as 'Couldn't find work in my native country', 'My parents farm was too small and unproductive' 'Work was scarce and life was too hard' and often simply 'To find work' were commonplace. Many, finding life too hard in the Italy of the twenties and thirties, travelled to rejoin relatives already living in France.

Alongside the many stock replies there are a few which present a more interesting aspect. One applicant stated mysteriously that he had abandoned his native land due to political intrigue, a Russian emigre had left 'following the revolution' and an eastern European arriving during the war had deserted the Bulgarian front to enlist with the French forces'. Such intrigue was far from the norm however. Most of those seeking naturalisation stated simply that they had come to France to improve their chances of finding work and to support their families.

However, while it is reasonably easy to establish the motivations which led these individuals to leave their country of birth and come to France, it is less simple to establish the reasons behind their applications for naturalisation. After all, most were long term residents, immigrants who had been living and working in France for ten or more years. What made these people suddenly decide to undertake the effort and expense involved in an application for French citizenship?

In addressing this issue, the answers given on the application questionnaire to the question 'Why are you applying for naturalisation?' are less useful. Replies such as 'To become French', 'I have no desire to return to Italy', 'To fix myself in France' and 'To be French' are so bland and guarded that they convey little of the motivations behind applications. Certainly a number of applicants, about 1 in 5 or 20%, gave personal responses such as 'having married a Frenchwoman I want to adopt her nationality'. In these cases it is understandable that when married to a French woman and raising French children, to become French oneself might be a desirable symbol of permanence. However, the 40% of applicants who were bachelors had no such justification. In most cases, the answers given are just not sufficient. To assert that an applicant wanted to become French because he had decided never to return to his native country is a superficial truism. Many immigrants worked, lived and died in France without ever considering naturalisation. Those that did must have had fairly strong motivations which, like those which led them to uproot themselves in the first place, were probably a mixture of the personal, the political and the economic.

One obvious distinction between immigrant workers and bona fide French citizens was in the area of political rights. Immigrants had no political rights. Although many immigrants were in actual fact quite quick to install themselves on the electoral roll once their decree of naturalisation had come through, it can still probably be safely assumed that many working class immigrant labourers could in fact easily live without the right to vote. On the other hand, the restrictions placed on the civil and economic liberties of immigrants were certainly much more onerous. The most potent symbol of these restrictions was the identity card.

Since 1916 foreigners had been required to purchase, renew and carry an identity card. This card restricted the immigrant to specific geographical areas and determined what profession he or she could exercise. Any change in personal circumstances had to be registered with the local police and the identity card could be withdrawn at any time. This meant a loss of the right to reside in France and could thus lead to formal expulsion. The grounds for this could be extremely arbitrary and immigrants had none of the judicial guarantees which citizens had.

No doubt this somewhat one-sided relationship irritated many long term immigrants who had devoted the bulk of their working life to France. In times of prosperity however, or at least in times when French labour was relatively scarce, many were still content to take the best job they could find, secure in the knowledge that there was always a strong demand for their services. Naturalisation may have appeared to many as expensive, complex and somewhat extraneous to their daily existence. However, it is possible that the incentive to seek naturalisation became much higher once this security was shattered. With the onset of the depression came a desire among many French citizens to find someone to blame. That someone was the immigrant worker.

As Cross explains it, 'During the 1930s, the desire to displace the costs of the depression onto the non-citizen was zealously promoted by the far right but it also extended across the political and class spectrum'. In fact, foreign labour had by this time become a critical sector of the economy and the threat of large scale repatriation was small. French employers, as well as business interests on the right, resisted a full scale purge of the immigrant workforce. But the threat was clearly felt however, whipped up by the xenophobic headlines ('Le travail aux Francais d'abord') of right wing dailies such as *l'Intransigeant* and *l'Ami du Peuple*. The state too used its administrative powers to actively encourage repatriation. In March 1932, the Ministry of Labour provided funds for local officials to transport unemployed immigrants to the French frontiers. Prefects were requested to 'persuade' those who proved unwilling. In addition to this, the labour placement offices severely reduced the number of work authorisations granted, and thus many immigrant identity cards were not renewed.^[13]

These administrative restraints may have driven many to seek naturalisation, especially when combined with an increased threat of expulsion during the depression years. This certainly goes some way to explaining the peak in naturalisation occurring in 1933.

So, as we can see from this system of controls, as one author has already noted 'The thrust of French policy was not to make loyal citizens of immigrants... Their goal was instead to create "subjects" in the old sense of the term'. Given this, it can be assumed that naturalisation was not conferred out of a desire to extend the benefits of French civilisation to the expatriates of less fortunate nations, but was motivated rather more by self interest on the part of the French state. Having examined those who applied for naturalisation and what they sought, it is perhaps now appropriate to investigate the other side of the coin. What was France looking to gain from the process of naturalisation?

In examining the various records produced by naturalisation applications, an impression comes through of local officials in a real dilemma in the 1930s. On the one hand, as touched upon earlier, France had a clear, perceived need both to bolster the general, French population and also to counteract the trend

for 'colonies of foreigners' to congregate in border regions. One journal, *La Reforme Sociale* claimed, 'It is important that the nation absorb and assimilate from these colonies...all those who are healthy, hardy and honest'. [14] And this was in essence the French dilemma. Demographic anxieties appeared to militate on behalf of increased naturalisation. On the other hand, current pseudo-scientific theories and popular fantasies concerning the criminality and ill health of immigrant workers pushed the other way. This conflict between national need and public fear was displayed very well in the naturalisation dossiers. Firstly there were the forces which advocated increased inclusion.

I referred earlier to the theme of depopulation as a driving force behind the 1927 legislation, and this was seen to apply especially in rural areas. The Basses Alpes was in fact one of the least populated of all departments with a population of only 85,000. In 1931 a sous-prefet of the Basses Alpes wrote to the prefet, urging the speedier naturalisation of northern Italians, warning that 'without their vital contribution, our villages in the high valleys will very quickly fall uninhabited'. [15] Similarly, the Director of the local labour placement service wrote gloomily that 'Throughout France, and in our department in particular where depopulation worsens daily, we are compelled to...fall back on foreign labour...for the cultivation of a large number of farms abandoned due to lack of manpower'. Given these fears, applicants seeking naturalisation with large families were thus particularly prized. On the application form of one individual with 5 children, 4 of them male, the mayor wrote that 'Given the depopulation ravaging our region...it is in the national interest to attach them to French soil'. Conversely, to be nearing old age and have no children could be taken as a black mark against a candidate. One Italian labourer who applied for naturalisation in 1932, aged 56, was rejected by the prefet who wrote that 'I have to note that his naturalisation will bring nothing of benefit to France given that he is a bachelor and of advancing years'.

It's not a surprise to learn that French officials were concerned about depopulation. Given this, the fact that these officials used the process of naturalisation to recruit large families and workers for depleted professions, can also be readily understood. However, what is perhaps more surprising are the close links between the process of naturalisation and recruitment into the armed forces. From the mid 1930s onwards, as the threat of war became more and more certain, so the official linkage between naturalisation and recruitment became increasingly pronounced.

Marc Rucart, Minister of Justice, speaking as early as 1937 admitted 'I wanted naturalisation policy to take into account, primarily, the necessities of national defence...'. [16] Concrete measures were also taken. A ministerial circular sent to the prefects in October 1939 outlined a simplified and accelerated procedure for the naturalisation of male foreigners aged 18-45 from Belgium, Switzerland, Italy and Spain who had requested enlistment... [17] Prior to this, in September, modifications had already been made whereby all candidates for naturalisation of military service age (18-29) whatever their financial status, would be visited free by a military doctor.

These changes in fact merely codified what had already been unofficial practice for some time. Central government concerns over recruitment had always been reflected at a regional level. The naturalisation dossiers from the Basses Alpes contain numerous references by both applicants and officials. On the side of the applicants, many, when asked why they sought naturalisation referred to a desire to complete French military service. 'To become French and to complete my military service in France' was almost a standard reply among young bachelors with little by way of property or profession. Certainly there was always a sense that for individuals with little else to offer, a tour of national service could be used as part of the payment required for the favour of naturalisation. Official comments support this view. Referring to one applicant the prefet wrote that 'His desire to serve in France militates in his favour and for this reason his application should be taken into consideration.'. In another case the view was even more blunt, simply, 'He will help fill the gaps in the army caused by 'les anneés creuses', the hollow years'. Such was the French need for troops that a willingness to undertake military service could overcome most obstacles. Applications could be rushed through for such individuals and also, as the prefet wrote in 1939, 'These foreigners, offering payment in blood, will be exonerated of all charges, if accepted'.

So, these were some of the effects of perceived depopulation on the mentality of local officials. Suitable applicants for naturalisation were highly prized either as cheap labour or willing footsoldiers. However, while naturalisation levels in the 1930s were at a higher level than ever before, officials were still cautious. Popular alarmist anxieties mitigated the desire to increase naturalisation any further. Among these fears the big three concerned ill-health, criminality and political activism among immigrant workers.

Pseudo-scientific theories concerning the lack of hygiene and the particular diseases supposedly associated with immigrants were fairly widespread. At its most fanatical this was outright xenophobia disguised under a sheen of scientific legitimacy. One of the most well known proponents of such extremism was Dr Rene Martial. Although initially well respected for his involvement in the installation of 'sanitary control centers' on the border with Spain, in the early 1930s Martial developed a new, negative theory base. Between 1928 and 1933 he conducted extensive research into blood groups and used this to identify supposed 'indices' which implied that certain racial groupings would be more assimilable in France than others. He attempted to use his theories to restrict and direct immigration and naturalisation and also advised against 'metisage', or mixed marriages, claiming that 'not only will this mixture of different blood groups produce lunatics and cripples of all kinds, but moreover the half-breed result would have a disastrous influence over the community'. [18]

Martials theories were plainly not always empirical and certainly never convinced the whole scientific community. However, if views as extreme as these were not the norm, fears relating to the cost of supporting sick immigrants were far more common. The numbers involved were indeed considerable. In 1936 there were 19,600 admissions of foreigners to French hospitals, making a total of 426,082 sick days imposed from outside on the French health care system.

It is unsurprising therefore that a section on the application questionnaire was devoted to the candidates state of health. Generally, nothing less than full health was accepted. In reply to the questions 'Is the applicant healthy?' and 'Has he any physical or mental disabilities?', every single applicant answered 'yes' and 'no' respectively. Of course, it does not necessarily follow that they *were* all in perfect health but it certainly illustrates the importance of the matter to the officials involved, who would demand an independent medical certificate if there was any doubt over the matter. References to an applicant's health were often appended to questionnaires. Specific comments such as 'Has a good physique and robust health, he'll make a good recruit for France', were not uncommon.

Past injuries or illnesses were not a problem provided they did not interfere with an applicants present ability to work. In one instance a police report noted that 'the applicant has been injured on his left arm, but this injury doesn't affect his work in any way and he still has a robust constitution'. However, the detection of health problems of any significance would usually result in rejection. Another individual had worked in France as a miner for almost his entire life. Then, during the course of his application for naturalisation, he had fallen victim to a work related accident. Despite his years of work in France it was deemed that 'of advancing years and without family, his naturalisation would appear to offer no material advantage to France'. Clearly then, any past service counted for very little. If an individual wasn't fit to work he or she was surplus to requirements, as far as the naturalisation service was concerned.

The second public fear associated with immigrants was that of criminality. Again, the level of truth behind this assumption is hard to assess but certainly many contemporary authors appear to have lent it credence. One author summed up public perceptions when he wrote that 'These crowds of immigrants are largely rootless and poorly adapted, and account for around a third of all criminality and disorder in France'. Similarly, Roger Millet drew his readers attention to the fact that in 1936, Italians spent 218,592 days in French prisons, at a cost of over a million francs to the tax payer.

Given these concerns, it is hardly unexpected to find that officials went to great lengths to ensure the 'Conduct, Morality and Loyalty' of applicants. Employers and landlords had to supply certificates attesting to good conduct and detailed police reports ensured that even the most minor legal infractions

were taken into account. On one application for naturalisation in the 1930s the candidate had been sentenced to 4 months in prison in 1885, for a minor public order offence. The local mayor was willing to waive this considering that at the time the candidate was only 20 years old and had no other judicial record. Despite this the application was adjourned indefinitely by the central authorities, seemingly for no other reason than this minor slur. In another case I remember, the local police commissioner had reported that a relative of the applicant was under police surveillance and in this case, unproven suspicions pertaining to this relative of the applicant were enough to contribute to his rejection.

In a sense, the stringency of the authorities over health and criminality is only what would be expected. Perhaps more interesting is their third great fear, that of political activism on the part of immigrants. These fears were directed equally towards the political left and right, that is to say they pertained to both communism and fascism. Actually, *this* threat was largely imaginary, or at the very least negligible. Of the 800,000 or so Italians in France, most of them in fact remained strictly a-political.

All applicants for naturalisation were questioned about their political tendencies, but most gave answers so bland as to be almost meaningless. Neutral, none, nothing, no interest in politics account for over 70% of replies. This would appear to have been highly sensible on the part of the applicants as the French authorities seem to have prized political neutrality extremely highly. Lack of political interest was often noted on applications as a virtue. Some examples include comments such as

'Bauer is considered a serious and hardworking subject, keeping himself apart from any political party.'

'He speaks French fluently without a foreign accent. He has no interest in politics and is not suspected of harbouring communist tendencies.'

So, political neutrality was equated by the French authorities with good citizenship. Officials were so worried by the prospect of fascist and communist emigres arriving from Italy that the slightest hint of links to any off-center grouping could lead to rejection. A case in point was that of the Italian Alexandre Biggi. the police reported that 'From the point of view of work, Biggi gives satisfaction, but...this foreigner professes communist ideas. At a funeral for the victims of a mining catastrophe he gave, in Italian, a speech which was clearly communist'. Interestingly, in rejecting this application, his political tendencies which, in fact, were merely left wing rather than revolutionary, were deemed 'subversifs' and more interestingly 'anti-francais'.

Leanings to the right were sought out and rejected with exactly the same McCarthyist fervour. In the case of another Italian, who was deemed 'a fervent admirer of fascism and especially of Mussolini', the extent and depth of police files are shown. It was reported that 'It is well known that one day, in a discussion taking place in a cafe, he made a comparison between the French and Italian governments, without hiding his preference for the latter'.

These then were the three most easily classified areas of official concern but, in reality, almost any deviation from a stereotypical norm could be used against an applicant. Any personal information obtained by the police or given by informants could be taken as evidence of an 'irregular situation' warranting rejection. One applicant almost failed on the basis that his French mother in law quote 'left something to be desired from a moral point of view'.

It seems then that French officials had very particular concerns in mind when assessing applications for naturalisation. On the one hand fears over predicted depopulation led them to seek healthy recruits for the lower end of the workforce and for the armed forces. The allure of a productive working life or the completion of a tour of national service could often atone for a lack of immediate skills or a current state of poverty. If these benefits could not be exercised in person, they could be conveyed by proxy if the applicant had a large enough family. This evidence would seem to indicate a desire to assimilate, to naturalise as many suitable candidates as possible. On the other hand, public officials couldn't ignore public concerns. Hence, a contradictory tendency can also be detected. Officials were quick to clamp down on applications, rejecting candidates who showed the smallest signs of impropriety in their personal or political life. Evidence of any irregularity, however small, pertaining to health and any information which could be construed as evidence of a criminal nature also warranted an almost automatic rejection. The reasons for rejection could thus be just as varied as the reasons for acceptance.

What then can be concluded from this research? In the inter-war period, 7% of the population resident on French soil was foreign. Does France appear to have been more willing to integrate and accept these outsiders on a permanent basis than other nations? The answer appears to be both yes and no. Yes, France did feel a particular need to assimilate and integrate during the 1930s. Yes, in certain circumstances the state was willing to bestow full French citizenship on long term immigrants. But no, this desire was by no means universally applicable. The 'faveur' of naturalisation was reserved for certain key groups of applicants, those matching most closely the needs of France, as perceived and interpreted by central and local governmental officials.

Any analysis of the 1927 nationality legislation shows it clearly rooted in popular fears of national self-diminution. Pressure to increase population, to assuage both economic and military concerns, was instrumental to the entire process of naturalisation in the late 1920s and early 1930s. When considering the applicants themselves, certain specific 'types' are found. Generally coming from races considered easily assimilable, Italians in particular, most notable are either the young bachelor apt for military service, or the older, married man whose stable, numerous family was able to contribute by proxy. These applicants were motivated most commonly by the economics of their own personal and national situations. They came to France to find work and applied for naturalisation to secure the continuation and amelioration of their working conditions.

These applications were motivated by self-interest and it should come as no surprise that the actions of the French officials involved were similarly motivated, albeit by national self-interest. Certain types of workers, particularly agricultural workers in the case of the Basses Alpes, were sought to bolster the areas of the economy spurned by the French. For those without the requisite skills, payment could be made via national service. The process of naturalisation can thus be seen as a form of socio-economic transaction, conducted on a grand scale. Certainly there was no philanthropic or altruistic aspect to the process. Yes, France was concerned about assimilation. Yes, France wanted to fix immigrants permanently via the process of naturalisation, but only very specific categories and only on very specific terms. From 1927-1939 value was given strictly according to value received, until with the coming of war this delicate and finely-tuned process was fatally disrupted, to emerge in the late 1940s in a new and different format.

[E-seminars index](#) | [back to the top](#)

Charts (gif images)

These charts will open in a separate browser window.

- [Chart 1](#) (294KB) - The national rate of naturalisation
- [Chart 2](#) (267KB) - Rate of naturalisation in the Basse-Alpes
- [Chart 3](#) (299KB) - Naturalisation by nationality of applicant
- [Chart 4](#) (191KB) - Age of naturalisation in the Basse-Alpes

Notes

1. R.Millet, *Trois Millions d'Etrangers*, Paris, 1938

2. C. Bonnet, 'Naturalisations et revisions de naturalisation de 1927 a 1944: L'exemple du Rhone', in *Le Mouvement Social* (1977, No 98, pp. 44-75) See also 'Les Pouvoirs Publics et l'Immigration de l'entre-deux-guerres', Theses de Troisieme Cycle (Publiee par le Centre d'Histoire economique et sociale de la region lyonnaise. Lyon, 1967)
3. R.Brubaker, 'Civic and Ethnic Nations in France and Germany', in Hutchinson & Smith, *Ethnicity*, (Oxford University Press, 1996)
4. G. Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France*, 1983
5. *La Reforme Sociale*, Bulletin de la Societe d'Economie Sociale, Tome V, Mai-Juin, 1925, pp. 330-332
6. G. Mauco, *Les Etrangers en France* p. 553. The highest rated department was that of the Bas-Rhin, naturalizing 21% of its foreign population. Other high flyers included the Var at 12% and the Hautes Alpes at 11%. The Basses Alpes ranked joint seventh alongside the Alpes Maritimes and the Vaucluse.
7. G.Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France*, (1983)
8. Gary Cross, 'To assimilate or regulate: French immigration policy in the 1920s', *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, (1982) 10 (3): 1-20
9. G.Mauco, *Les Etrangers en France. Leur role dans l'activite economique*, (Paris, 1932), p.549
10. Lambert, *La France et les Etrangers*, 1928
11. Archives Departementales, Alpes de Haute Provence, 6M 28
12. These figures can never be totally precise as it is known for certain that in a number of cases the wife has adopted the nationality of her husband on marriage and then applied for re- integration alongside his naturalization. On the application form therefore, both husband and wife are listed as Italian. It is impossible to tell how may cases this applies to.
13. Full details of these trends can be found in Gary Cross' recent work yet even the details outlined here are sufficient to establish that immigrant workers bore the brunt of layoffs, at a percentage four and a half times greater than that of the French laboring population.
14. *La Reforme Sociale - Bulletin de la Society d'Economie Sociale*, Avril 1927
15. Archives Departementales des Alpes de Haute Provence, Dossier 6 M 28
16. Speech reported in *Le Temps*, 5th Avril 1937
17. Archives Departementales des Alpes de Haute Provence, Dossier 6 M 28
18. R. Martial, *La Race Francais*. Paris, 1934

[E-seminars index](#) | [back to the top](#)

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