

# Scouting for Girls (1920) as a Handbook for American Girlhood.

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## Progressive Era Girl Scouts and the Immigrant: Scouting for Girls (1920) as a Handbook for American Girlhood

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### Abstract

The publications and activities of the Girl Scouts offer a fruitful site for examining shifting notions of female citizenship and American identity. This essay considers the home-making and physical fitness passages of *Scouting for Girls* (1920) in the context of early twentieth-century maternalist activism and women's efforts to Americanize immigrants. Linking concerns about immigrants' health and cleanliness to a brief interval of Girl Scout Americanization efforts, the essay finds that Girl Scouting empowered middle-class girls to impart the doctrines of municipal housekeeping, scientific mothering, and vigorous good health that middle-class women promoted among in their clubs, colleges, and settlement work.

## Progressive Era Girl Scouts and the Immigrant: *Scouting for Girls* (1920) as a Handbook for American Girlhood

Laureen Tedesco



American Girl Scouting emerged in an era particularly hostile to immigrants, the years just before and after World War I. While Americans of the Jane Addams mold embraced the immigrant, others saw the eastern and southern European immigrant as a threat to Protestantism and democracy. Unprecedented numbers of immigrants had entered the nation since the turn of the twentieth century, averaging about 1650,000 newcomers a year between a high point in 1907 and the beginning of the Great War (Higham, *Strangers* 159). In fact, during World War I, "first- and second-generation immigrants together reached an all-time high in proportion to the older native-born Americans," historian John Higham notes ("Instead" 336). The war in Europe stirred American suspicions of immigrants as potential traitors to U.S. interests; recent immigrants already appeared to be threats to American democracy and labor relations. Accordingly, urgent calls to "Americanize" and thus neutralize the threat of the immigrant appeared steadily in the popular press from about 1915 to 1919, with some lingering interest in the question appearing as late as 1924. The resulting Americanization movement reflected both fears of immigrant bolshevism and espionage and optimism that the targeted European immigrants could become acceptably mainstream Americans through education. Churches, civic groups, settlement houses, public schools, municipalities, and employers threw themselves into the effort to mend the English, hygiene, and morals of immigrants, including all three topics in the citizenship education they provided. At the same time, racially motivated fears lurked in the background, so that by the end of the war "Nativists now demanded that all foreigners be completely transformed into Americans forthwith and—inconsistently—that the blood of inferior races must stop pouring into American veins" (Higham, "Instead" 332).

The nation's fervid period of Americanization—following more gradual efforts since the 1880s—enlisted children as well as the women who had long worked in the field. An unknown number of Girl Scouts assisted adults

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