

Michael Limmer  
University of Missouri–History Department  
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Making a New Kind of Migrant:  
Ethnicity, Gender, and the War Brides Act of 1945

On December 28, 1945, the United States Congress passed the first in a series of marriage reunification laws, the War Brides Act. The U.S. House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization designed the War Brides Act to ease the migration and naturalization process of U.S. service members' foreign spouses and children from World War II. The House committee began deliberating in May of 1945 on how and if Congress would respond to the pleas of their soldiers to grant passage and citizenship to their spouses. To do so, Congress needed to modify its restrictive quota system set in place by the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. Under this ethnically restrictive immigration law, these war brides found their ability to immigrate curtailed, and a path to citizenship was, for many, nonexistent. The House committee considered these women as a product of war and in a different category from other migrants and the ethnic categories. Congress, facing pressure from constituents and the war department, needed to grant some form of privileged immigration status for the foreign brides. What ensued over the next year were debates of citizenship, immigration, and gender that highlighted the committee's xenophobic misapprehensions of these foreign women. It is from these debates that the House committee developed several laws that Congress passed for family reunification. These laws were twofold. They actively undermined and reinforced the restrictive immigration system. The War Brides Act maintained the racial qualifiers of the 1924 legislation, but the law allowed certain ethnic women to migrate in mass numbers uninhibited by the quota system. It gave the transnational couples a legislative vehicle to navigate the restrictive policy in the form of a privileged migration status because of their spouses' loyalty to the state. This path created a new category of immigrant that called into question existing ethnic and gendered assumptions.

This paper explores the gendered and racial assumptions surrounding the construction of the War Brides Act and subsequent acts of family reunification. Utilizing sources from government records, house committee debates, *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, soldier letters, and oral histories, the paper seeks to understand this privileged immigration status and how the state valued and justified the immigration. The War Brides Act significantly separated the spouses from racial exclusion as their value to the state did not originate from their ethnicity as traditional laborers in the workforce as with previous waves of migration. Instead, the law obscured their ethnicity to force them into the narrative of the state's ethnically restrictive immigration system. Through the War Brides Act, their value to the state derived from their role as familial laborers, as wives and mothers of U.S. soldiers.