The Hidden Trade

Debating prohibition and its effects on 1920s life

SS24.US2.3d "Summarize the debate over prohibition and describe how prohibition contributed to social and cultural changes of the 1920s."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one argument for prohibition and circle one argument against it. Number two ways the ban changed social or cultural life so you can trace the effects of the law.

A Ban That Changed More Than Drinking

1 In 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act began a nationwide ban on making, selling, and transporting alcoholic drinks. Buying or drinking alcohol itself was not banned by the amendment. Supporters, including many temperance activists, argued that saloons drained family incomes and fueled violence. They hoped fewer places selling liquor would mean safer homes and more dependable workers. Some also saw the ban as a test of whether a democracy could improve public behavior through law. Yet Americans disagreed about both the goal and the federal government's power to pursue it.

2 Opponents argued that the ban limited personal freedom and made ordinary customers into lawbreakers. Demand for alcohol continued, so smugglers brought liquor across borders, while illegal producers supplied local buyers. Organized crime groups profited from distribution and sometimes used bribery or violence to protect their trade. Federal agents raided illegal sellers, but scarce resources and uneven local cooperation made enforcement difficult. Critics cited the black market as evidence that the law was doing harm. Supporters replied that illegal trade showed a need for stronger enforcement, not a reason to abandon the goal of reducing alcohol abuse.

3 In cities, some customers gathered in speakeasies, secret places that sold alcohol, where music and dancing could also draw crowds. These venues gave some women more visible roles in nightlife, and jazz performers found paying audiences there, though many clubs excluded Black patrons even while hiring Black musicians. Prohibition did not create jazz or women's changing roles, but it reshaped where people met and how they spent leisure time. By the early 1930s, public frustration with crime and enforcement helped build support for repeal. In 1933, the Twenty-first Amendment ended the national ban, without ending arguments about alcohol's social costs.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Summarize one goal of prohibition's supporters and one objection raised by its opponents.

2. How did continued demand for alcohol support critics' argument, and how did supporters respond?

3. Describe two ways speakeasies affected 1920s culture. What is one limit to a claim about those changes?

4. How did enforcement difficulties shape both the illegal alcohol trade and the debate over repeal?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 1928 letter to a newspaper from the perspective of a resident deciding whether to keep the national ban. State your position, fairly address an opposing argument, and explain how the ban has changed two parts of community life using details from the passage and a plausible local observation.

ANSWER KEY

The Hidden Trade

GRADE 11 · SS24.US2.3d

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one argument for prohibition and circle one argument against it. Number two ways the ban changed social or cultural life so you can trace the effects of the law. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Summarize one goal of prohibition's supporters and one objection raised by its opponents.	**Supporters hoped to protect families by reducing alcohol sales. Opponents argued that the ban limited personal freedom.**
2	How did continued demand for alcohol support critics' argument, and how did supporters respond?	**Continued demand helped create a black market that profited organized crime, which critics saw as harm caused by the ban. Supporters argued that illegal trade called for stronger enforcement.**
3	Describe two ways speakeasies affected 1920s culture. What is one limit to a claim about those changes?	**Speakeasies provided paying audiences for jazz performers and gave some women more visible roles in nightlife. Prohibition did not create jazz or women's changing roles, and many clubs excluded Black patrons.**
4	How did enforcement difficulties shape both the illegal alcohol trade and the debate over repeal?	**Scarce resources and uneven local cooperation made illegal sales difficult to stop. Frustration with crime and enforcement later helped build support for repeal.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

To the editor: Our town should end the national alcohol ban. Last Saturday, a neighbor whispered that the back room of a cafe now sells drinks, and customers slipped inside after dark. That secret trade gives sellers a reason to hide from police rather than follow public rules. I also hear jazz from the room, where young women join the dancing, although not everyone is welcomed equally. Supporters rightly worry that drinking can damage families and wages. Yet a ban that pushes sales into hidden rooms and rewards lawbreakers is not protecting those families as promised.

Accept either position in the letter if it addresses an opposing argument and connects the ban to two social or cultural changes supported by the passage. Treat the letter's local details as imagined observations, not historical evidence.