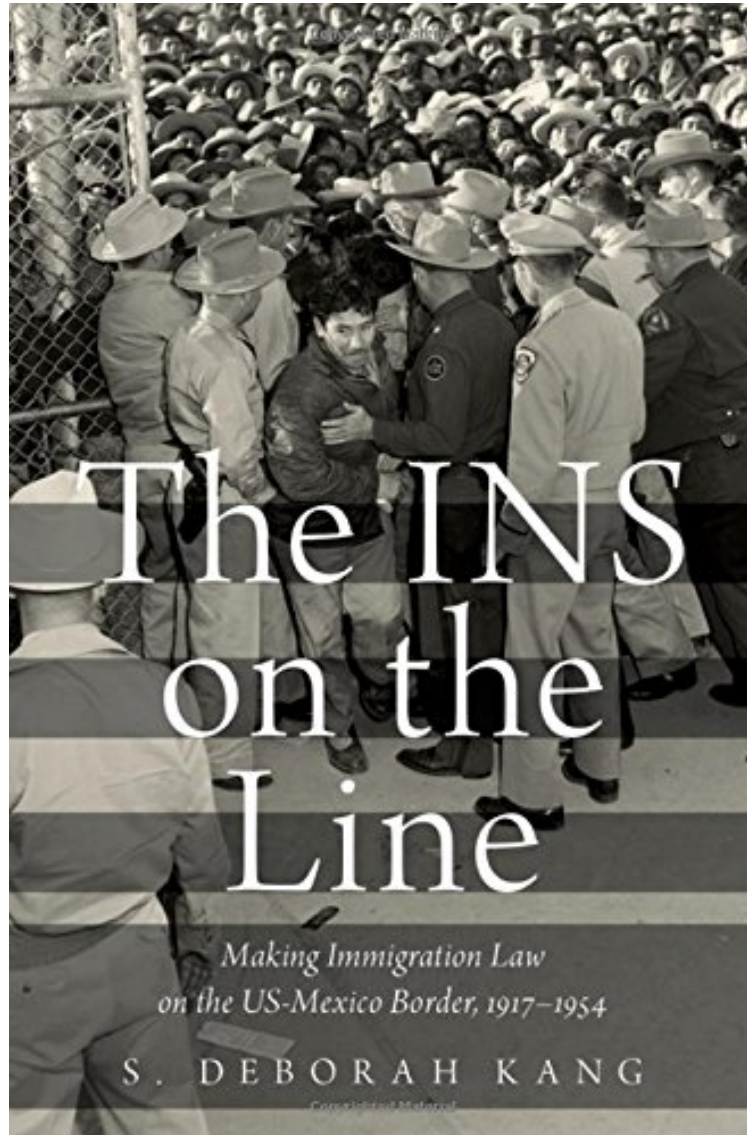


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# The INS on the Line: Making Immigration Law on the US-Mexico Border, 1917-1954

*S. Deborah Kang*

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## Immigration Law on the US-Mexico Border, 1917-1954:

For much of the twentieth century, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officials recognized that the US-Mexico border region was different. Here, they confronted a set of political, social, and environmental obstacles that prevented them from replicating their achievements on Angel Island and Ellis Island, the most restrictive immigration stations in the nation. In response to these challenges, local INS officials resorted to the law, nullifying, modifying, and creating the nation's immigration laws and policies for the borderlands. In *The INS on the Line*, S. Deborah Kang traces the ways in which the INS on the US-Mexico border made and remade the nation's immigration laws over the course of the twentieth century. Through a nuanced examination of the agency's legal innovations in the Southwest, Kang demonstrates that the agency defined itself not only as a law enforcement unit but also as a lawmaking body. In this role, the INS responded to the interests of local residents, businesses, politicians, and social organizations on both sides of the US-Mexico border as well as policymakers in Washington, DC. Given the sheer variety of local and federal demands, local immigration officials constructed a complex approach to border control, an approach that closed the line in the name of nativism and national security, opened it for the benefit of transnational economic and social concerns, and redefined it as a vast legal jurisdiction for the policing of undocumented immigrants. The composite approach to border control developed by the INS continues to inform the daily operations of the nation's immigration agencies, American immigration law and policy, and conceptions of the US-Mexico border today.

"Kang's deeply researched book yields powerful insights about the importance of studying immigration law in action, shifting our focus from Congressional policy-makers in the nation's capital to low-level immigration officials on the nation's southwestern border with Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century. Short on resources and torn between competing interests, immigration officers used their most powerful weapon--administrative discretion--to devise procedures that ultimately became national policy. Want to understand what made today's militarized border possible? Read this book!"--Lucy E. Salyer, author of *Laws Harsh as Tigers: Chinese Immigrants and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law*"The *INS on the Line* is a superb book. Kang provides an institutional history of the Immigration and Naturalization Service on the US-Mexico border that is engaging and deeply illuminating. She illustrates the myriad ways in which rank and file agency officials stationed in California, Arizona, and Texas not only implemented federal immigration law, but also helped craft the law itself, demonstrating that they did so not only to better reflect the complex realities of border life but also to better serve the agency's own interests. Though focused on the first half of the twentieth century, the book contains critical insights for our understanding of contemporary immigration policy. This timely book is a must-read for scholars interested in immigration policy, borderlands studies, and the American administrative state."--Cybelle Fox, author of *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal*"In this meticulous legal history, Kang reveals how immigration officers on the US-Mexico border not only enforced national regulations, but also shaped and gave meaning to US immigration law. For anyone trying to understand the origins of the tangled bureaucracy, deportation raids, and overcrowded detention centers that make up the modern American immigration system, this is the place to start."--Rachel St. John, author of *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border*"This book is an important contribution to our understanding of the history of border policing. It stands alone in the historiography for its depth of research and understanding of the fine-grained procedural aspects of early INS and Border Patrol history...This book would be useful to assign in undergraduate classes about the border, and it could serve as a valuable example to graduate students of how to conduct effective legal and institutional history."--C.J. Alvarez, *Western History Quarterly* About the Author S. Deborah Kang is an Assistant Professor of History at California State University, San Marcos.