

Alvin Saunders Johnson Biography

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Biography

American economist and editor Alvin Saunders Johnson (1874-1971), as director of the New School for Social Research, established the graduate faculty of political and social science.

A son of a Danish immigrant farmer, Alvin Johnson was born on December 18, 1874, in Homer, northeastern Nebraska. His pioneer upbringing did not prevent him from learning enough Greek and Latin at home to be admitted to a premedical course at the University of Nebraska. He graduated from the university in 1897 and enlisted in the military service during the Spanish-American War. After an honorable discharge, he began his graduate studies at Columbia University. He received his doctorate in economics in 1902 and subsequently taught at Columbia, Cornell, and Stanford universities and at the universities of Nebraska and Chicago.

In 1917 Johnson became editor of the *New Republic*, a prominent liberal periodical. He remained editor until 1923, when he assumed the directorship of the New School for Social Research in New York City. It was there, during the 1930s, that he provided a haven for refugee scholars from Nazi Germany and created, in the graduate faculty of political and social science, a center for social research of international renown. While at the New School, Johnson accepted the position of associate editor of the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, which became a monument to scholarship in the social sciences and remained the standard reference work in its field for many years.

In both his academic and private lives, Johnson demonstrated his concern for members of minority groups discriminated against or persecuted at home and abroad. In 1944 he drafted the Ives-Quinn Law for the New York Legislature. This statute was enacted to penalize discrimination against Jews and African Americans.

In 1945 Johnson retired from his post at the New School and also stopped actively participating in political and educational affairs. He remained, however, an indefatigable raconteur and continued to publish works of fiction, as well as an autobiography. He received many accolades during his lifetime for his scholarship, his courageous defense of academic freedom, and his support for refugee scholars. He was given honorary doctorates from Brandeis University and the University of Nebraska and from foreign universities, including Brussels, Algiers, and Heidelberg. Johnson died on June 7, 1971, in Upper Nyack, N.Y.