

Hans Werner. *Imagined Homes: Soviet German Immigrants in Two Cities.* Studies in Immigration and Culture Series. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2007. 297 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88755-701-9.



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Wished or Unwished? Soviet German Immigrants in Germany and Canada

In the 1980s, conservative government ministers in West Germany refused to accept the term *Einwanderungsland* (country of immigration), objecting to the influx of foreigners and emphasizing the *ius sanguinis* (right of blood) notion of German immigration law. A German citizen had to trace his or her roots back to German blood. Therefore, second-generation Italian, Greek, or Turkish immigrants were treated as foreigners in their country of birth. Many of them qualified in their jobs or graduated from German universities yet faced numerous challenges in everyday life. For example, academic scholarship institutions routinely barred *foreigners* from receiving financial support. At the same time, so-called Volga Germans, whose ancestors had migrated to Russia two hundred years ago, received equal status immediately on arrival in Germany.

As Hans Werner shows in his remarkable comparative study, immigration remains an experience full of challenges and difficulties, even if the host country is more open to newcomers. He does not address the issues of multiculturalism or the slow self-recognition of Ger-

many as a destination for immigrants. Rather, he concentrates on two ethnic German migrations from the Soviet Union. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, approximately six thousand former Soviet citizens moved to Winnipeg, Canada. In the 1970s, a similar sized group left the Soviet state and settled in Bielefeld, Germany. Werner concedes that different expectations shaped the outcome: whereas the *new Canadians* assumed they would need to adapt to a foreign environment, the immigrants to Germany felt they were *coming home*. Consequently, the receiving societies' perception of the immigrants helped or hindered integration. To navigate the maze around such concepts as assimilation, integration, and ethnicization, Werner chooses to define "integration" as *feeling at home*, a point in time when interactions between immigrants and the host society are no longer considered a product of immigration but part of the normal cultural, political, and social life (p. 10).

Werner places his book in the context of other comparative studies on immigration, such as Samuel L. Bayly's book on Italians in New York and Buenos Aires (*Im-*

migrants in the Land of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914 [1999]); and employs concepts from studies by Nancy L. Green (*Ready to Wear and Ready to Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* [1997]), Nancy Foner (*In a New Land: A Comparative View of Immigration* [2005]), and Matthew Frye Jacobsen (*Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* [2002]). Designed as asymmetric comparisons, these studies intend to improve our understanding of group identity, ethnicity, and transnationalism. His sources include an impressive series of interviews in Winnipeg and Bielefeld, and archival documents, from, among others, the Canadian Lutheran World Relief, the Baptist World Alliance, and the Bielefeld Stadtarchiv.

The study highlights the difference between settling in the welfare state of West Germany and the strategies of self-reliance in Canada. Werner investigates the role of families, faith, and language in the process of integration. Not surprisingly, Canada proved to be better suited for immigrants than Germany. It was easier to become an entrepreneur in Canada than in Germany. It was easier to maintain multiple identities, to be Canadian and German at the same time. In Bielefeld, ethnic Germans found themselves in a bind; the host society considered the *Aussiedler* not quite German enough, but they were not outright foreigners either. Consequently, whereas Winnipeg authorities allowed immigrants to develop their identity on their own, West German society saw them as “a problem” and aimed at erasing their previous experience by offering language and integration programs. The program aimed at linguistic and cultural assimilation.

Most important, Canadian authorities did not challenge the religiosity of the immigrants but welcomed it. By contrast, German officials did not appreciate newcomers whose world revolved around large families and their Christian faith. When Mennonites expressed their reverence for German language and folk traditions, preserved in the Russian Diaspora for many generations, they encountered ridicule in a deeply Americanized West German pop culture.

In addition, many Germans referred to the immigrants as “Russians” and looked down on them. Post-war Canada, by contrast, considered the Germans as hard working and modest. The inhabitants of Winnipeg spent

little time worrying about how the newcomers might fit in. Although the German state paid higher settlement costs, Werner maintains, this did not lead to better integration. Citizenship did not mean acceptance by society. For young immigrants facing discrimination, speaking Russian remained significant. According to a 1990 study by Barbara Dietz, 39 percent continued to speak Russian with their friends.

At the end of his well-documented study, Werner concedes that “feeling at home” remains challenging, because the complexity of individual lives, especially the religious ideals of the mostly Mennonite immigrants, defies easy categorization. For many believers, secular German public schools, especially classes on sex education, are a threat for their children’s spiritual values, and Germany does not offer the option of home schooling. As Werner puts it succinctly, the conflict between the imagined Germany and the reality of Anglo-Americanized Germany was “an initial shock and a continuing source of estrangement” (p. 228).

Perhaps natural in a study focusing on the new homeland, the immigrants’ previous lives do not play a large role beyond a concise chapter on the history of ethnic Germans in Russia and the Soviet Union. But although Werner mentions the treatment of ethnic Germans by Soviet authorities and society, he does not explain what it meant for children to be labeled “fascists” in kindergarten, and what it meant for adults to experience extreme religious persecution in an atheist state. Yet it was the most significant factor in motivating the immigrants to leave their environment and must have played a major role in assisting them to adapt to difficult circumstances in their new homelands.

Unfortunately, the conclusion refrains from placing the study in a broader context. One would have liked to read how Werner’s empirical findings correspond to the concepts of assimilation, for example, among second- or third-generation immigrants. Anecdotal evidence from Germany suggests Russian-language cultural events remain immensely popular among young recent immigrants, perhaps evidence of multiple identities reasserting themselves. Even with these minor drawbacks, by investigating the different experiences in the receiving countries, Werner’s study marks a major step in understanding the nature of ethnic German migration.

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