



**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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## The Challenges of Integration: Imagined Livelihoods and Everyday Experiences

Immigrants' expectations about the host country determine the degree of their integration into their new environment. This is, in a nutshell, the main argument posited in Hans Werner's *Imagined Homes*. The book follows the journey of two German-speaking groups from the Soviet Union into the West and compares their social and cultural integration in post-World War II Bielefeld, Germany, and Winnipeg, Canada. Given their German ethnic background, at first glance, one might suppose that the members of the group who came to Bielefeld experienced a smoother transition than those migrating to Canada. As so-called *Aussiedler* (resettlers), the members of the first group spoke German and were entitled to West German citizenship, welfare benefits, and retroactive pensions. In marked contrast, the immigrants who settled in Winnipeg encountered what the author dubs a *laissez-faire* approach to settlement, benefiting from no state support other than their admission to the presumed land of *honey and milk* (p. 8). However, as Werner's detailed analysis reveals, the Winnipeg group ultimately experienced fewer tensions than the

Bielefeld group. While the members of the Winnipeg group were open to change and keen to adapt to Canadian ways, the members of the Bielefeld group arrived in a West German city which did not correspond to the image that they had fostered in the diaspora about the homeland. From this Werner follows that the varying expectations of the two immigrant groups lay at the bottom of the two groups' different social and cultural integration.

To illustrate his argument, Werner begins his book with a chapter that sheds light on the groups' common German-Russian background. He describes the formation and development of widely dispersed German-language communities in the regions of the Black Sea, the Volga, and Volhynia since the eighteenth century, and argues that until their settlements were destroyed by World War II they developed a common identity as a result of Russification efforts, wars, the Soviet revolution, and Joseph Stalin's dictatorship. Chapters 2 and 3 provide further background information and describe the social and cultural environments that set the stage for the

integration efforts of the immigrant groups in Winnipeg and Bielefeld. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the arrival, reception, and early phase of the immigrants' lives in West Germany and Canada. Two important differences come to the fore. The Winnipeg group arrived in the first postwar decade, and consisted of immigrants who had left the German-occupied parts of the Soviet Union together with the retreating German troops in the last months of the war. In contrast, the immigrants to Bielefeld, who arrived in the 1970s, hailed from southern Siberia and Kazakhstan to where Stalin had deported the German Russian communities that had remained under Soviet control after Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union.

Following the analysis of the transit period, Werner in chapters 6 to 8 focuses on the transformation of the immigrant community in Canada and West Germany, specifically with regard to key institutions, such as the family, church, and language. While chapter 9 concludes the book with an examination of the immigrant groups' associational affiliations and citizenship status, chapters 6 to 8 most clearly spell out Werner's argument. For example, Werner shows how the immigrant group in Winnipeg accepted the prevailing Canadian customs whereas West Germany's secularized society shocked the immigrants in Bielefeld and resulted in disillusion. As devout Catholics, Protestants, or Mennonites, in Bielefeld they resented the pressure to adapt to secular norms: "in Germany," as Werner quotes one immigrant, "there is freedom—but it is not freedom if I have to send my children to sex-education classes" (p. 71). Another example involving the immigrants' German-language skills illustrates even more forcefully Werner's argument. Although the *Aussiedler* were of ethnic German background, their archaic use of German clashed with West Germany's increasingly anglicized German. While the Russian-German immigrants in Canada were expected to learn English and readily did so, their peers in West Germany were shocked to have to take German-language classes, which, to their dismay, used textbooks explicitly designed for "foreigners" (p. 186).

Werner's salient argument doubtless furthers our understanding of immigrant integration processes (although primarily in terms of cultural rather than social dynamics). In both cities, the immigrant groups ultimately settled in strikingly similar ways despite the apparent different forms of reception, receipt of welfare allocations, and language competencies. As newcomers, members of both groups experienced a phase of substratification, followed by increasingly secure and gainful employment and, finally, a degree of economic and ma-

terial comfort that appears to have matched the levels of the general population (e.g., home ownership). That said, while the *Aussiedler* had a hard time coming to terms with West Germany's cultural prerequisites, Canada's much-vaunted multicultural tolerance should be scrutinized more carefully. Neither did Canadian tolerance allow the development of distinct German-Russian or German-Canadian identities nor was the first generation of immigrants capable of fully adjusting to Canadian ways of life. They lived their lives as immigrants or New Canadians and remained anchored in one of Canada's many "solitudes."

There are three further points that need to be addressed. For one, Werner identifies a relative "asymmetry" that, he argues, allows for a comparison between the two locations, pointing out, for instance, Winnipeg's and Bielefeld's similar histories of receiving large numbers of migrants. However, there are substantial differences in size. While Winnipeg counted several hundred thousand residents in the postwar years, Bielefeld was comparatively small with about one hundred thousand inhabitants. The five or six thousand Soviet Germans who arrived in Winnipeg and Bielefeld each were consequently much more noticeable in the latter city. Second and more important, if the immigrants had different expectations about their future lives, the Canadian government certainly played a role in shaping those expectations. Werner overlooks the importance of Canada's admission procedures, which scrutinized prospective immigrants from head to toe and thereby selected a cohort of immigrants more readily willing to adjust to the contingencies of the new environment. Thus, the role of the Canadian state is more important than Werner suggests. Certainly, in early postwar Canada, there were no public services that provided accommodation to immigrants or funded their professional retraining. But the immigrants were selected to face the Canadian market, be "self-reliant," and settle without state support. By contrast, West Germany admitted the *Aussiedler* solely on the basis of their ethnicity; their aptitude to integrate, their health condition, age, or professional background did not matter. Though they were granted privileged access to citizenship and public services (especially when compared to other West German immigrants), they were not specifically recruited for the labor market and therefore posed a considerable challenge to the West German administration (this was perceived as especially problematic when in the 1990s two million German Russians from the former Soviet Union arrived in Germany). Third, Werner's comparison of integration processes in two dis-

tinctively different time periods and locations is not without methodological problems. Certainly, in terms of evaluation criteria Werner takes care to nuance the specific settings and to provide a balanced assessment. Nevertheless, his reliance on oral histories begs the question whether the interviews Werner conducted in the mid- and late 1990s provide an equal basis to compare the integration processes in two different urban settings. When Werner interviewed the members of the Winnipeg group, more than forty years had elapsed since their arrival, compared to twenty years in the case of the Bielefeld group. What impact did the time difference have on the memories of interviewees? Moreover, as the West German interviewees were speaking, the mass arrival of so-called late *Aussiedler* from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was in full swing and caused considerable public controversy. To what degree were the interviews influenced by these events? Is this the reason why for this group of migrants the author prefers to use the term

“Soviet Germans” over the more commonly used label of “Russian Germans”?

All in all, Werner’s inspiring comparative study offers insights of definitive interest to scholars of migration studies and, more specifically, German-Canadian transnational studies. It reflects the complex stories of a group of migrants that shared a common German-Russian heritage. Besides providing a sound and well-based argument, it also reflects social and cultural dynamics that are of definite contemporary interest. At a time when the West German public is once again debating the value and challenges of immigration, Werner’s study clearly shows how the *Aussiedler* of the 1970s, whose comparatively large families provided a source of public criticism, became an integral part of German society. One should not forget that Germany’s hopes to finally win the soccer world cup in 2006 or 2010 rested on two *Aussiedler* kids.

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