

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Wagner. *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada, 1850-1939.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006. 281 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 9780774812153.

Reviewed by Andreas Fahrmeir, Historisches Seminar, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität.

Published on H-German (April, 2007)

Why Canada?

Jonathan Wagner has written a monograph on a migration movement that was in many ways a peripheral one. From a Canadian perspective, Germans accounted for a relatively minor share of immigrants, compared to former residents of the British Isles, of eastern or southern Europe. Seen from Germany, Canada was one of many destinations for migrants who wished to leave the country and were prepared to travel over long distances, but were, for whatever reason, not attracted by the United States, the destination for the overwhelming majority of transcontinental emigrants. Nevertheless, the movement from Germany to Canada was significant in absolute and often symbolic terms. The way Wagner tells it, the story of German-Canadian migration was a tale of parallel experiences: both Germany and Canada experienced federation and increasing international autonomy from the 1860s; both were ruled by domineering conservative figures presiding over *de facto* liberalization in the 1870s; both participated in the First World War, and both went through traumatic economic crises in the interwar period.

The book is organized chronologically in four chapters, covering 1850-70, 1870-90, 1890-1914 and 1919-39, which treat four main topics. The first thread linking the chapters is the development of Canadian immigration policy, which refers both to restrictions on or incentives for certain classes of immigrants, and the measures Canadian governments took to attract German would-be emigrants to Canada. The second theme, linked to the first one, is the German view of emigration to Canada and political steps taken to encourage or, more frequently, hinder it. The third issue concerns what one might call classical migration history: an analysis of the quantitative aspects of migration flows and of push and pull factors which influenced migration decisions. Finally, every chapter discusses the experience of the journey.

These four argumentative threads produce different impressions. Canadian immigration policy emerges as a missed opportunity. Canadian governments were slow to

seize chances in Germany either by establishing official representatives, agreeing to activists' initiatives, or developing a realistic and yet attractive image of Canada that moved beyond the focus on the cold and nature in its romanticized or threatening variants. Part of the problem appears to have been the need to adapt Canadian activities to U.S. ones, which all too often appears to have resulted in the description of Canada as a version, whether inferior or superior, of the United States. The initial failure to attract German settlers had long-term consequences, because it meant that Canada lacked the basis for the chain migration that proved to be the most effective way of attracting immigrants. Immigration policy inclined to general openness in the beginning of the period, but turned increasingly selective as the federal government introduced and refined regulations that allowed immigration officials to bar entrants or deport alien residents on the grounds of poverty, ill health, or poor moral character.

German emigration policy was equally ambivalent. In principle, emigration was possible and permissible, despite various bureaucratic and financial hurdles. Some local governments encouraged and assisted the emigration of paupers to alleviate financial burdens and ease social tensions, but such programs had largely ended by the 1860s. By contrast, the imperial and state governments looked askance at emigration agents, because they were suspected of distributing false or misleading information in order to separate emigrants from their money. Several Canadian agents came into conflict with these emigration restrictions in the imperial period, sometimes spending time in prison as a result. Wagner's assessment of the quantities of migration focuses on global figures and the economic situation in both countries; less information is offered on settlement patterns or patterns of regional origin. The history of the journey, by contrast, is one of progress: travel became safer, swifter and more comfortable with the introduction of new types of ships and regular, more reliable railway connections.

Covering a broad topic in very limited space is always a particular challenge. Wagner's approach of combining the political, economic, cultural, and technological history of two countries for almost a century in just over 200 pages of text presents a clear picture and a cogent argument, but obviously involves sacrifices. The book is based on a broad reading of archival records as well as printed, secondary works on emigration and emigration policy in Germany. The primary focus remains, however, on the Canadian side of the equation. The description of the German political and economic context is sometimes very brief, and this is reflected in the bibliography, which lacks the type of general works on German history which are found for Canada. What is more regrettable is the lack of quantitative information on the travel experience, such as length of journeys, common routes, ticket prices, or the distribution of classes in which emigrants traveled.

The narrative is also framed in a particular way. Frequent references to missed opportunities suggests that it would have been possible to imagine a more fruitful cooperation between Canada and Germany, countries with sometimes similar experiences and complementary needs, that would have led to more extensive emigration or immigration. Yet, the author never explains how Canada could

have been made more attractive than the United States in the nineteenth century (when, after all, quite a number of Canadians and immigrants from Britain decided to move south of the border after experiencing life in Canada as well), given that earnings prospects tended to be higher, the United States had more German communities, and emigration to Canada did not meet German policy goals, which by the later nineteenth century, included directing emigrants to ethnic German communities that might form the core of future political dependencies or close allies of the German Empire.[1]

Aside from the fact that it would always have been possible to write a book differently, however, the strength of Wagner's account stand out far more than the potentially controversial choices of emphasis and interpretation. Wagner has written a concise, yet comprehensive survey which covers the main themes of German emigration history to Canada and combines approaches from economic, political, and cultural history in an innovative and convincing way.

Note

[1]. See most recently Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im deutschen Kaiserreich* (Munich: Beck, 2006).

Citation: Andreas Fahrmeir "Review of Jonathan Wagner, *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada, 1850-1939*," H-German, H-Net Reviews, April, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=236061183836230>.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.