

Special Thematic Block

Undesirables in the Last Best West?

Central and Eastern European Immigration to Canada

Introduction

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In the course of various waves of immigration to North America, numerous labels were used in the receiving countries to describe Central and Eastern European immigrants, ranging from hunkies through “stalwart peasants in sheepskin coats” to undesired or non-preferred. The mostly derogatory labels, which in many cases also came hand in hand with discrimination, a selective immigration process, and restriction that made the immigrant experience even more challenging, reflect the negative perceptions of people coming from this region of the world. Although most people from the Old Continent chose the United States as their destination in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Canada also became increasingly attractive for them, especially in the wake of tightening restrictions in the USA that culminated in the 1920s and clearly targeted New Immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. In the process, these immigrants contributed to shaping the rich multicultural society of their new home in multiple ways.

Despite the great ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity of the group of immigrants discussed here under the umbrella term of Central and Eastern Europeans with the resulting differences in their settlement patterns also taken into consideration, we are able to identify certain

similarities when it comes to their migration trajectory in the past two hundred years, and their experience as immigrants in Canada. These include shared push factors of historical turmoil, poverty, religious persecution, and social malaise as well as a positive perception of North America as the land of opportunities, often fuelled by immigration propaganda. This thematic section provides a glimpse into such an experience by looking at the historical, cultural, and literary aspects of Central and Eastern European immigration to Canada. It also serves as the basis of an edited *HJEAS Books* volume on the same topic to be published in 2023 that, besides the subjects included here, will also feature a thorough historical overview of Hungarian immigration to Canada, a discussion of illegal immigration from Canada to the United States, and Czech immigration to and images of Canada, among others. The term “Central and Eastern European” is used in the broadest possible sense in this issue (and the future book) to be able to reflect on the migration experience of a great variety of peoples (even if due to the nature of the journal, there is a stronger focus on Hungarians).

Typically, the United States proved to be the most attractive destination for immigrants from the region, with the largest number arriving during the period of New Immigration from the 1880s to the First World War. Within this period, approximately four million people left Austria-Hungary for the United States, with more than a million coming from the territory of Hungary (for the statistics on the immigration of various groups mentioned here see Powell). Although exact figures are almost impossible to specify due to the varied categories under which people were registered upon their arrival, about 2.5 million Polish immigrants and 500,000 Ukrainians also arrived among many others. The composition of these immigrants differed significantly from those arriving decades before and already living in the country: they were mostly young and male without education or industrial skills, and their primary aim was to save as much money as possible, and send or take it back home, which also meant that they were often less willing to assimilate. As a result, anti-immigrant and nativist sentiment gradually appeared and became more and more widespread, culminating in calls for a general restriction of immigration especially from Central and Eastern

Europe (for a detailed overview see Daniels).

From the 1880s onwards, more and more restrictions were introduced, ending the former free immigration policy of the country and barring various groups from entering the US. The Great War gave a boost to American restrictions mainly because of the fear of enemy aliens in the country and doubts about their loyalty, and in 1917 a literacy test was introduced. This did not stop another major wave after the war, as a result of which a growing number of people demanded the introduction of quotas. The Emergency Quota Act was passed in 1921, followed by the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which effectively ended New Immigration from Central and Eastern Europe by establishing a quota for each country in a way that clearly showed that restrictions targeted immigration from these regions.

This period also saw the first Central and Eastern European arrivals in Canada, although much lower in number, and often involving people relocating from the US. The Canadian government argued that immigrants would play a key role in the development of the western provinces and although Canada was much less attractive overall than its southern neighbor, various measures targeting specific immigrant groups proved successful, the process also being supported by improving infrastructure and the popularization of Canada through the image of the “Last Best West” to attract more people into the country.

Canada preferred immigrants from Great Britain, the United States, and Northern Europe, primarily those with capital and with agricultural skills (Knowles 69). However, at various points immigration from Central and Eastern Europe was also encouraged, and thus the first bigger groups from the region arrived at this time either from the United States or directly from Central and Eastern Europe (Vineberg 11). Studying this period, Eric Wilkinson introduces the history of Jewish agricultural settlements in Western Canada. Wilkinson not only provides an overview of the history of over a dozen farming colonies established between 1884 and 1891, but also reconstructs the lives of the colonists and examines how various organizations

facilitated their settlement. He takes detailed note of the various impediments to their success, reconsiders the usual presumption that their colonies were bound to ultimately end in failure, and re-evaluates the legacy of such settlements.

Peter Bush also surveys the period when the first immigrants from the region now called Ukraine arrived in Canada. Ukrainians (mostly from Galicia and Bukovina) also fit into the plans of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier and especially those of Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton, arguing that peasants from Eastern Europe would do well on the Canadian prairie and contribute to its development. At the time approximately 170,000 persons migrated to Canada from present-day Ukraine, mostly settling in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Bush examines the immigration experience of these people through the study of the Independent Greek Church in Canada, representing a middle ground between The Presbyterian Church in Canada, who desired to bring the growing Ukrainian diaspora into the Presbyterian fold, and the Ukrainian immigrant intelligentsia who envisioned a culturally and linguistically independent, Protestant church for themselves. The paper offers a new interpretation of the history of the Independent Greek Church in Canada, stressing the agency of the Ukrainian participants and the role of religion in the immigration process.

As already noted, Canada was not the primary destination of Central and Eastern European immigrants prior to the First World War, partly because it could not compete with the attractiveness of the United States, and partly because of the Canadian preference for British and American immigration as Central and Eastern Europeans were often considered undesirable. The Canadian governments also introduced various restrictions (Immigration Acts 1906 and 1910), and the situation was further complicated during the Great War due to the peculiar position of enemy aliens (resulting in their disenfranchisement and with many of the “foreigners” even placed in internment camps). Nevertheless, while the United States shut its gates tight after the war, Canada opened its borders and offered new opportunities for people

from previously non-preferred countries, bringing about the reversal of former measures barring immigration. This period, however, did not last long due to the ensuing Great Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War emerging in its wake when Central and Eastern Europeans fell into the communist bloc, which obviously also impacted immigration from the region to North America. At the same time, some significant historical events resulted in the arrival of larger groups of people. More than 37,000 Hungarians were received after the Revolution of 1956, and, after the Prague Spring in 1968, 12,000 Czechs were admitted to Canada, representing fundamentally different groups in terms of their background, composition, and reasons for emigration. The former group is discussed in greater detail in three essays related to 1956 and its aftermath.

Sheena Trimble makes her contribution to the rich historiography of 1956 from a so far little studied perspective, providing a fascinating analysis of women's actions and attitudes related to the refugee movement. Relying on scrupulous archival research, Trimble offers new insights into this wave of immigration while also revealing the evolving roles of women, both Canadians and refugees, in Canadian society at the time, stressing their symbolic power and agency in the movement. Many people arriving in and after 1956 left a clear mark on Canada and contributed to Canadian culture in more than one way. Two essays in the section illustrate this through examples from the fields of literature and music.

Mária Palla scrutinizes Erika Gottlieb's *Becoming My Mother's Daughter: A Story of Survival and Renewal* (2008), an account of the protagonist Eva Steinbach's life starting in her native Hungary and continuing in Canada (after her escape from Budapest in 1956). The chronicle of events in Eva's life unveil the real life experiences of the author herself, but the book is also studied as a transgenerational family memoir, a search for identity, and a testimony of a child survivor of the Holocaust in Hungary, intertwined with a discussion of the intermedial dimension of the book. Victor Kennedy and his colleagues examine the life and work of Gábor Hegedűs, who also escaped from Hungary in 1956 as a child, worked under the stage name

B.B. Gábor, writing several successful songs and albums, many of which were unmistakably influenced by his migration experience and his position of being caught between East and West, enabling him to provide satirical commentaries on culture, politics, and life on either side of the world. The essay discusses B.B. Gábor's life in terms of his international airplay, most notably on Radio Free Europe, his difficulties in coping with life as a refugee and as an immigrant to Canada, and his legacy in both North America and his native Hungary, by providing an analysis of song lyrics and interviews.

The essays in the thematic section span a period from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, shedding light on a variety of experiences by immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe—the thematic range of the section is to be expanded in the *HJEAS Books* volume devoted to the same topic and scheduled to be published in 2023. Let me take this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone who made the publication of this section possible, the authors for their invaluable contributions, the reviewers for their feedback, Editor-in-chief Donald E. Morse for his continuous support and encouragement, Éva Mathey for her comments, and issue and copy editors Marianna Gula and Mariann Buday for their professional work throughout the publication process.

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