



**BROOKLYN COLLEGE**

**of**

**The City University of New York**

**School of Social Science**

**Department of History**

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EAST CENTRAL EUROPEAN  
PERCEPTIONS OF  
EARLY AMERICA

Edited by

BÉLA K. KIRÁLY, GEORGE BARANY

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**To commemorate the United States Bicentennial**



## PREFACE

This small volume is one of Brooklyn College's contributions to the celebration of our nation's bicentennial. It deals with the question of how America has been understood by Austrians, Czechs, Hungarians, Poles – peoples of East Central Europe – and their rulers. We hope that it will help to explain why, of the 27 million European immigrants who entered the United States between 1880 and 1930, most came from that area. The findings of the authors indicate that the image of America has been extremely attractive to many statesmen, intellectuals, and ordinary people of East Central Europe. Not unexpectedly, many were fascinated by the American way of life and impressed by the potential or actual riches of the land. However, what struck them the most, was the way in which the ideals of the freedom, dignity, and equality of men were integrated into American life. In a very real sense, we are also saying something about why the residents of the Greater New York area, our borough included, now reside here, since so many of their forebears who arrived on these shores came from East Central Europe and were drawn by the visions which are described here.

The contributors approach their subjects from several academic points of view: history, political science, and comparative literature. They are George Barany, Denver; Paula S. Fichtner and Béla K. Kiraly, Brooklyn; Eugene Kusielewicz, St. John's; Alfred A. Reisch, Library of Congress; Joseph Rothschild, Columbia; Irene M. Sokol, Fairleigh Dickinson; and František Svejkský, formerly of the University of Prague, now of the University of Chicago.

Part of the book contains the proceedings of a panel discussion co-sponsored by the Mid-Atlantic Slavic Conference, an affiliate of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, and the East European Section of the Center for European Studies at the Graduate School and University Center, CUNY. Other portions developed within the framework of advanced classroom research and discussions at Brooklyn College. Thus the volume is closely tied to academic activities at our college and university.

As in the case of previous volumes in this series, it is a pleasure to express our appreciation to the Graduate School and University Cen-

ter, CUNY, for supporting the conference which inspired this book.

We are also deeply grateful to the Kościuszko Foundation of New York for a generous contribution to our publication costs.

That one of Brooklyn College's contributions to the American bicentennial is a work of serious scholarship is a testimonial to the abiding commitment of this college to academic research—current difficulties, among the greatest that our university has had to face, notwithstanding.

July 4, 1976

JOHN W. KNELLER  
President



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# INTRODUCTION

JOSEPH ROTHSCHILD

The social history of the United States can be written largely in terms of the themes of immigration and frontier. These two themes are, indeed, twinned, for the concept of frontier can and should be extended from its conventional reference to the westward, agricultural expansion of American society across the continent, to encompass as well the phenomenon of the urban, industrial frontier. And it is on this latter frontier that the vast majority of the immigrants from East Central Europe made their original contribution to American society and were, in turn, first acculturated into that society.

Though there is a tradition claiming that two of Columbus's sailors on his first voyage of discovery to America were Ragusans, though it is indeed a fact that Poles were members of the original English colony at Jamestown in the first decade of the seventeenth century and that Czechs came to New Amsterdam during the second quarter of that same century, and though occasional other Slav, Hungarian or Rumanian immigrants from the realms of the Habsburgs came to settle in pre-Revolutionary or pre-Civil War America, yet the overwhelming bulk of the immigration from East Central Europe is "new," that is, it dates from after the Civil War and particularly from the half-century 1880-1930 during which the United States received 27 million immigrants – many from East Central Europe.

This East Central European immigration into America was but a part – though probably the largest part – of a more general East Central European flight from overcrowded villages and out of peasant agriculture into urban existence. This demographic movement, in turn, was generated by the extended and expanding impact of the industrial revolution from Britain and France eastward across Europe. Warsaw and Budapest, for example, became immigrant cities for surplus East Central European peasants extruded out of their hinterland villages just as did Pittsburgh and Chicago. But America, with its high living

standards, its political freedom, and its reputation as a land of open opportunity, beckoned and magnetized the most enterprising and venturesome and hopeful of these redundant villagers and provincial artisans and peddlers.

The Jews, though often emigrating out of Tsarist Russia, should here be included as part of the East Central European immigration into the United States, since their Pale of Settlement in the Tsarist empire, as well as the Habsburg provinces of Galicia and Bukovina from which many others of them came, can legitimately be regarded as belonging within East Central (rather than Russian) Europe. Whereas the gentile peasants were squeezed out of agriculture by economic and demographic trends, the Jews left the Old World not only for these, but also for additional political reasons – to escape pogromist violence, educational and occupational prohibitions and restrictions, and extended terms of brutalizing conscription.

Though 80 percent of the immigrants from East Central Europe settled in the northeastern quadrant of the United States, that is, the area north of an imaginary line running from Baltimore to St. Louis and east of the Mississippi River, yet no region of this country failed to attract some of them. Thus there are Czechs in Nebraska, Poles in Colorado, Hungarians in Florida, Jews in Arizona, and so on.

Though the waves of “new” immigrants from East Central Europe were initially met with coolness at best and, more often, with vehement hostility and sharply prejudicial ethnic stereotyping at the hands of “native” (pre-Revolutionary) Americans and Americanized “old” immigrants stemming from Western Europe, and though the conditions of their work-places and living-places (usually on the urban frontier) were harsh and primitive, they nevertheless kept coming. One should not misinterpret here the significance of the seemingly high proportion of immigrants who returned to East Central Europe (about 30 percent) in the first two decades of the twentieth century since these returnees were usually the single men, who, upon finding a bride in the old country, were as likely as not to immigrate a second time into the United States. Among those who arrived here as families or as married men preceding the rest of their families, the reemigration rate was low. For one thing, the negative conditions propelling them out of the Old World did not attenuate. For another, the chronic labour shortage of the expanding American industrial economy rendered it well-nigh impossible to deny jobs to the immigrants in the long run (or even in the intermediate run). Finally, initial rebuffs and

disappointments notwithstanding, the United States did, after all, confirm the East Central European immigrant's visions and expectations.

These visions and expectations were not – contrary to conventional assumptions – exclusively economic and privatistic. True, the immigrant came to escape grinding poverty, overpopulation, underconsumption, disease, and economic despair. But it would be an oversimplification and hence a distortion to define his image of America exclusively in the coarse metaphor of the land whose streets were supposedly “paved with gold.” America also projected itself to East Central Europeans in terms of a distinct political and public-value image or, rather, series of images. The United States was to them the land of freedom – not freedom in the abstract or the rhetorical, but freedom in meaningful historical terms, for instance freedom from the heritage of neoserfdom, freedom from religious establishments and their repression of dissent, and freedom from legalized hereditary privilege. America, in other words, was unencumbered by, hence free of, the onerous and oppressive historical ballast of East Central Europe. This freedom from history, in turn, meant that the United States was free to be an innovative, inventive society – both in the direct technological sense and also in the sense that it had the freedom rationally to construct, to test, and to rebuild its institutions to achieve optimal functionality. There is hardly an East Central European visitor or immigrant to America whose diaries or correspondence fail to reflect the profound, positive and, indeed, exhilarating impression made by America's perceived capacity for innovation. And this vivid impression, conveyed back to East Central Europe, in turn shaped the expectations which each subsequent wave of immigrants and visitors would bring with it.

In effect, therefore, the East Central European immigrant – perhaps without being capable of fully articulating his perception – saw the United States in terms very similar to those which had animated the Founding Fathers. America was felt to be a product and an expression of the rationalistic temper of the Enlightenment, not of the historicist nostalgia of the Romantic era. The American experiment was committed to the sequential propositions that men may rationally and deliberately construct their institutions which, in turn, shape the kind of citizens that the society wishes to cultivate. Furthermore, political institutions were presumed to have normative if not historical priority over social institutions, that is to say the former do and should shape

the latter. Hence the political institutions must and do remain democratically available to redesign and reshape the country's social and economic institutions when these require change in order that the society might remain optimally free, rational and innovative. Virtually all the succeeding chapters of this book illustrate by example and by analysis the impact of this vision of America on East Central European observers and immigrants.

The immigrants chose to live and, where possible, even to work among their compatriots from the old country. Hence the adult generation of immigrants often did not learn English nor otherwise acculturate. But the children did, and this process often led to intergenerational strain, especially when acculturation in the second generation was followed by assimilation and denial or repression of ethnic heritage in the third. The 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, have witnessed a vivid and emphatic revival of the "ethnics'" emotional commitment to their ancestors' cultures and to the group identities stemming therefrom. Triggered by the assertion of Black pride and self-awareness, and both reacting to and emulating this unexpected phenomenon, the hyphenated American descendedants of immigrants from East Central Europe now insist on treasuring and recultivating their particular historical, cultural and even political identities. Perhaps the general crisis which has afflicted American society during these two decades of the 1960s and 1970s has also frightened people into a return to familiar and hence reassuring ancestral identities.

This revived ethnic assertiveness, while today almost universally applauded and, indeed, commendable (as are historical consciousness and self-consciousness in general), is not without its potential dangers: separatism, parochialism and provincialism threaten to undermine and to replace integration, universalism and cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, for the individuals asserting – or, rather, occasionally overasserting – their ethnic pride, the psychological danger of premature identity-foreclosure may be quite real. A tight and closed commitment is asserted while exposure to wider, more open and more mobile choices and identities is shunned. It is surely a pity when college students with the talent for productive and possibly even creative careers in medicine, law or science succumb instead to pressures – emanating from peer groups or from their own selves – to major in "ethnic studies" of one another particularity, be it Black, or Chicano, or Jewish, or Polish, or whatever, as their way of exploiting (misappropriating would be more accurate) the opportunity to obtain a liberal education.

It would be an oversimplification and an error to assume that America was perceived in specific hues only by potential immigrants in East Central Europe. Quite the contrary. Its image also impacted powerfully on those who had no intention or expectation of leaving the Old World but instead were searching for helpful models by which to reshape and redesign their several countries' institutions. Here, of course, the would-be American model competed with those of France, Britain and Belgium. As most nations of East Central Europe won or recovered independent statehood during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these three European models were usually preferred to the American one for purposes of the formal design of constitutions, but the American one was evaluated as most advanced, most enlightened, most innovative and most promising at the level of such institutional issues and design – problems as pedagogy, philanthropy, penology – areas in which the United States had supposedly demonstrated the practical viability of such ideals as equality, brotherhood and justice.

American socioeconomic institutions and values were also perceived as demonstrating the compatibility of democracy with security of property and even with the celebration of the business ethos, thereby giving the lie to the scare tactics with which European conservatives sought to panic the classes of property and order by identifying democracy with Jacobinism, socialism and anarchism. Indeed, in nineteenth-century Poland and Hungary even the gentry came to consider the Southern planter aristocracy or the New England merchant oligarchy of early America as appropriate models for the kind of liberal-conservative societies into which they hoped to coax their own countries. The early United States, in other words, appeared to confirm the feasibility of a conservative revolution, securing national political independence but without “degenerating” into a social revolution over which the traditional ruling and propertied elements would lose control.

Cautious East Central Europeans were, of course, also concerned lest America carry some of its democratic and liberal values to disfunctional excess. For example, its reputation for assertive individualism was on occasion suspected – particularly from the close of the nineteenth century – of threatening to transform it into a rampant gangster society or, at any rate, into a society without effective communal bonds; its egalitarianism was held responsible for alleged philistinism; excessive emphasis on organized private power, such as the corporation, the trade union, the interest group, provoked concern as