

GERMAN IMMIGRATION

German History

In the mid-nineteenth century, Germany created an Empire under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck. This empire was fiercely militarist and nationalist. The empire was completely dismantled after the First World War, leaving communities of Germans outside the German state. This external German community contributed to a duality in German identity: those who lived in Germany, and those who were “culturally” German. Hitler’s Third Reich used this external community as a justification for its territorial ambition; the resulting war ended with German defeat in 1945. Much of Germany was in ruins, and about 16 million Germans were driven from their homes by the war. The Allies divided Germany into four zones of occupation, which evolved into East and West Germany – two separate and ideologically opposed nations. The Communist government of East Germany fell in 1989; one year later Germany was reunited.



Halderm 1948

Immigration

German immigrants have been present in Canada throughout the period of European settlement, and have generally been seen as a “preferred” nation of origin. On the whole, German immigrants were possessed of better than average education, and form the fourth-ranked source of immigrants to Canada during Pier 21’s tenure as an active immigration shed (1928-1971).

One of the early peaks of German immigration, 1874-1911, came as the German state industrialized its economy, forcing many smaller farmers off the land and plunging the nation into cycles of high unemployment. In this and in subsequent waves of immigration, farming guided settlement decisions. The majority went to the Prairies or to rural Ontario, where they could buy arable land. This hunger for land brought German settlers from another major source: German immigrants already living in the United States learned of opportunities in Canada and traveled north. Other German immigrants bound for the United States traveled via Canada and chose to settle north of the border. Besides Scandinavians, Germans in Western Canada were the most rural of all immigrant populations.



Germans were considered enemy aliens by Canada during the World Wars, and in the aftermath of the Second World War, until 1951. This provoked many German-Canadians to redefine their ethnic origins – census information after the wars reveals slumping German populations and peaks in those claiming Dutch, Austrian or Russian heritage. The policy of treating Germans as enemy aliens was complicated by patterns of German settlement in Europe. Since mediaeval times, Germans have settled eastward in Europe, whether by accident of opportunity or by design of Empires. German-speaking Mennonites were expelled from Communist Russia as early as 1923 – one of many “German” ethnic groups that were not German in nationality driven to the New World by the steady expansion of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe.

Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia have the most substantial German communities in Canada, and even in modern times the German population is about 30% rural.