



Race and America's Immigrant Press: How the Slovaks were Taught to Think Like White People

By Robert M. Zecker

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Race was all over the immigrant newspaper week after week. As early as the 1890s the papers of the largest Slovak fraternal societies covered lynchings in the South. While somewhat sympathetic, these articles nevertheless enabled immigrants to distance themselves from the "blackness" of victims, and became part of a strategy of asserting newcomers' tentative claims to "whiteness." Southern and eastern European immigrants began to think of themselves as white people. They asserted their place in the U.S. and demanded the right to be regarded as "Caucasians," with all the privileges that accompanied this designation. Circa 1900 eastern Europeans were slightly dismissed as "Asiatic" or "African," but there has been insufficient attention paid to the ways immigrants themselves began the process of race tutoring through their own institutions. Immigrant newspapers offered a stunning array of lynching accounts, poems and cartoons mocking blacks, and paeans to America's imperial adventures in the Caribbean and Asia. Immigrants themselves had a far greater role to play in their own racial identity formation than has so far been acknowledged.

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Editorial Review

Review

Finally, we have a book that offers a rich account of American race relations as immigrants understood them, and read and wrote about them in their own languages. Based on a thorough reading of the Slovak language mainstream and labor press, this book will surprise, challenge and influence all scholars interested in whiteness. -- Donna R. Gabaccia, Director, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota

The many-sided brilliance of this book provides a model for the study of how new immigrants learned about the U.S. racial system. It roots its story on both sides of the Atlantic, reads the immigrant press carefully, and demonstrates how often and tragically the production of racial ideology lay at the heart of media, popular culture, and social relations.--David Roediger (University of Illinois) is the author of How Race Survived U.S. History If, as Benedict Anderson argues, newspapers play a central role in the forging of national identities, Zecker's study of Slovak-American newspapers demonstrates that in the U.S., immigrant newspapers forged an imagined community of hyphenated Americans who understood themselves as white. The book's comprehensive analysis of the Slovak and Russian press's coverage of lynching and the U.S.'s imperial war in the Philippines, as well as minstrel show jokes, commentaries on Jews, Asiatic Magyar despots, African "cannibals", and Italian and Mexican "bandits" brings together the insights from scholars of ethnic survival, European imperialism, Orientalism, and whiteness studies. While maintaining empathy for struggling, impoverished and "not quite white" Slavic immigrants," Zecker reminds us that not all the culture that immigrants brought with them to America was worthy of celebration, and that being the target of racial prejudice rarely leads to an opposition to racism or a rejection of whiteness. Instead, he shows that for many Slavs, acculturation to the U.S. meant exchanging old-world prejudices against Jews and Gypsies for the New world's Black/White binary. --Rebecca Hill, Program in American Studies, Kennesaw State University

About the Author

Robert M. Zecker is an associate professor of history at Saint Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia. He has published numerous articles (most recently "Let Each Reader Judge": Lynching Accounts in the Foreign Press" in the fall 2009 Journal of American Ethnic History.)

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