

The Great Departure. By Tara Zahra. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016) Pp. 392. Cloth, \$28.95.

A popular myth of migration tells us that European emigrants came to the United States (and other locales) with the specific desire of fulfilling a Horatio Alger success story. Descendants of these individuals have perpetuated that roseate notion by imagining their relatives as willing participants in a heroic struggle to realize the “American dream.” In the process of creating this narrative, however, they neglect to consider any alternative interpretations of the emigrant experience. Tara Zahra attempts to shed light on these oversights. Her monograph, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*, concerns itself with the subject of emigration, but displaces this myth by demonstrating the rarity of such cases of simple, voluntary aspiration. In reality, these men and women faced many obstacles in both their home countries and abroad that made the relocation process excessively difficult. Therefore, *The Great Departure* challenges the commonly held idea “that immigrants desired to come and to stay,” and instead proves that “many came reluctantly, pushed by circumstances at home, feeling that they had no other options, and that many wished mightily to return home again” (5-6). It is because of these and other significant observations that this study stands at the cutting edge of modern European scholarship.

There are several key facets of *The Great Departure* that render it an important and unique contribution to this field. In her analysis, Zahra points to the political elements of mass migration. She contends “that emigration could be manipulated like the steam-valve on a teapot; [and] that encouraging people to stay or go could be used as an instrument of policy, to serve both domestic and international goals” (6). The author keenly observes how large-scale exoduses negatively impacted domestic affairs, particularly military conscription, an availability of cheap labor, and the high populations that came to be regarded as symbols of strength. Yet, she cleverly details the opposite end of the spectrum as well, showing how many countries used the emigration process to rid themselves of “unwanted” groups while simultaneously attempting to keep “desirable” residents at home with propaganda. What she finds is that neither side actually benefitted from this arrangement since people who were coveted “tended to enjoy the least freedom of mobility,” whereas “ethnic and religious minorities [...] were free to go, but not typically welcome to return” (17). However, in making this astute observation, Zahra also puts forth the profound discovery that freedom does not always equate with mobility. In short, “the more Germans, Jews, and other minorities emigrated or were deported, the tighter the state’s iron grip on its ‘preferred’ citizens, who were needed to fill the demographic craters left behind,” became (18).

This kind of thought-provoking message is one of the major reasons why *The Great Departure* is an essential read for both academic and popular audiences. In her final chapter, Zahra offers a moving plea to the populace that “we should do our best to guarantee that migration is more ‘free,’ in every sense of the term” by taking “seriously the real concerns about the health and welfare of migrants and the integrity of families that drove and radicalized opponents of emigration in Eastern Europe for one hundred years” (289). Although she is careful to point out that travel remains far more liberalized within Europe since the collapse of

the Soviet Union, she is emphatic that many of the same stereotypes and fears about migrants still linger. Her call for scholars, policymakers, and everyday individuals to learn from the past and take an active role in correcting national myths, as well as the current xenophobia rising from present-day emigration issues, is nothing short of inspiring. Of course she is thoroughly convincing in this argument due in large part to her engaging writing style and skilled use of source materials.

Tara Zahra's *The Great Departure* joins ranks with other similarly important works in the field, such as Ben Shephard's *The Long Road Home* (2010) and Leo Lucassen's *The Immigrant Threat* (2005). What elevates this work from the others, however, is the methodology that Zahra employs in her analysis. In addition to comprising a sound political and intellectual investigation, *The Great Departure* is also an exercise in social history. Zahra's use of émigrés' letters and diary entries to detail their hardships and successes provides a personal perspective that is sorely lacking in other emigration studies. When Zahra compares and contrasts those viewpoints with the various propaganda pamphlets released by European Nationalists, a holistic picture emerges that places *The Great Departure* in its own unique historiographical category. Further, Zahra uses a wider set of parameters than Shephard and, unlike Lucassen, focuses on emigration rather than immigration.

While the subject matter of Zahra's study helps to distinguish it from the rest of the fold, her distinctive terminology is in need of additional explanation. Recent "popular histories" written on the topic of Europeans and their sojourns in the United States have muddled the definitions of "immigrant" and "emigrant." One need only browse through the *Images of America* series available at most local bookstores to realize that the popular press has used these two words interchangeably despite their decidedly dissimilar definitions. The key differentiation between the terms is a matter of geographic perspective: an emigrant is *from* someplace and is immigrating *to* another. This is a critical distinction, especially for Zahra's type of research, since using the word emigrant implies a great deal about the examination of these people. Not only does the author provide these men and women with more agency in the migration process by using this term, but she also makes a subtle statement about how they viewed themselves. Essentially, Zahra writes *The Great Departure* from the migrant's perspective. Since many of these individuals had no intention of settling in foreign lands and fought vigorously to maintain their individual cultural identities, they would certainly see themselves as emigrants as opposed to immigrants. The author does a fine job weaving this nuance throughout her text, but she does not explicate her assiduous vocabulary choice to the reader. Although it is understandable to assume that most academics know why Zahra is using emigrant as opposed to immigrant, this could potentially be a point of confusion for other audience members. Therefore, it would be helpful if Zahra had included a section in her introduction that discussed the variance between these two titles. Further, *The Great Departure* would also benefit from a formal conclusion (a feature that is noticeably absent) in which the author restated the vital findings of her scholarly inquiry. Unfortunately, some of Zahra's key points will undoubtedly be lost among her readership as the result of not including a chapter to emphasize her conclusions.

Still, such flaws do not seriously detract from the valuable contribution *The Great Departure* makes to the historiography of migration studies. Overall, Zahra's monograph lends a

critical dimension to this surprisingly neglected area of study and as such is worthy of high critical acclaim.

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