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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John J. Kulczycki. *The Foreign Worker and the German Labor Movement: Xenophobia and Solidarity in the Coal Fields of the Ruhr, 1871-1914*. Providence, R.I.: Berg Publishers, 1994. xiv + 297 pp.p. \$52.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85496-393-5.

Reviewed by Craig D. Patton (Alabama A & M University)

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Ever since Marx declared that workers have no country, it has often been assumed that national and class consciousness are incompatible and that existence of the former is an obstacle to the development of the latter. In this book, John Kulczycki explores the interrelationship between class and national identity in the Ruhr between 1871 and 1918 and comes to quite different conclusions. Kulczycki is the author of numerous other works on Poles and the "Polish Question" in the Kaiserreich, and he brings an immense amount of expertise to the topic. The result is a thoroughly-researched monograph that argues persuasively that a strong sense of ethnic identity encouraged labor militancy and organization among Polish-speaking miners. He also suggests that this finding can shed new insight into the process of class formation and political mobilization in other multi-ethnic societies.

According to Kulczycki, many of the standard histories on Ruhr workers distort the role of Polish-speaking workers in the German labor movement because they accept at face value the biased accounts of contemporary German observers and officials. He describes how these works (such as those of Koch, Tenfelde, and Hickey) routinely portray Polish miners as socially backward, hard to organize, ill-disciplined, and prone to violence. As a result, the Poles are still stigmatized as being one of the main obstacles to the development of the labor movement in the Ruhr. Kulczycki claims that reality was almost the exact opposite. He argues the Poles were among the most class-conscious, militant, and organizationally disciplined workers in the Ruhr. He lays the blame for the divisions and weaknesses of the labor movement in the Ruhr squarely at the feet of the Germans.

To prove this thesis, Kulczycki examines the role of Polish-speaking miners in the labor movement in the Ruhr in detail. He begins his account with a chapter devoted to patterns of Polish migration and settlement within the Ruhr. While this chapter draws heavily upon the work of other historians who have studied

the development of the Polish community in the Ruhr in general, Kulczycki analyzes how this process influenced the Polish miners' willingness and ability to organize and join forces with native miners. He points out that while most of the migrants came from Polish-speaking regions within the empire and thus technically had the same rights as any other worker or citizen (a situation which sets them apart from contemporary Gastarbeiter), they were viewed as "foreigners" by almost all Germans—officials, employers, and workers—and subjected to various forms of discrimination. Partly for this reason, the migrants tended to concentrate in specific mining colonies where they had few links with the German population. This residential segregation had a two-fold impact. On the one hand, it increased the migrants' own internal solidarity, but, at the same time, it reinforced the ethnic-cultural divisions between them and German miners (p. 39). While Kulczycki acknowledges the latter was an obstacle to inter-ethnic solidarity, he claims it was not a fundamental barrier because of the workers' shared experience in the mines. In other words, occupational rather than residential ties and bonds were the primary source of solidarity across national lines (pp. 42, 44). Yet, the Poles' segregated existence meant they were doubly disadvantaged and thus developed an "ethno-class consciousness" that often made them more militant and disciplined than the native German miners (pp. 46-47).

The next five chapters, which constitute the bulk of the book, examine the interplay between the Polish-speaking miners' ethnic identity and their sense of class consciousness, emphasizing how the former reinforced the latter. These chapters trace labor unrest, strikes, and union activity in a chronological manner, highlighting the role of Polish miners in these areas. Naturally, the mass strikes of 1889, 1905, and 1912 figure prominently in this, and each conflict is the focus of separate chapters. Much of the information on these strikes, including their causes and consequences, is not new, but in each case Kulczycki emphasizes the positive role played

by Polish-speaking miners. He argues that the Polish-speaking miners participated in these mass strikes at levels that were often higher than those for their German counterparts, indicating that their rural origins, recent arrival, and religious beliefs did not prevent them from recognizing their material interests or acting collectively to realize them (see, for example, pp. 56, 65, 140, 165, 177, 230). Similarly, he stresses that Polish-speaking miners displayed a high degree of persistence and discipline in such conflicts. For example, he argues that the Poles responded to the directives of trade union leaders (both German ones in 1889 and Polish-speaking ones in 1905 and 1912) in a timely and disciplined manner (pp. 68, 195, 248). Similarly, he argues the Poles were not particularly inclined toward violence and that the “excesses” which did take place were usually provoked by heavy-handed attempts by government authorities to harass and intimidate Polish-speaking miners (pp. 67-68, 117-20, 186-88, 230, 243-46). Indeed, one of Kulczycki’s recurring themes is the tendency of many historians to accept the biased accounts of contemporary German officials at face value and, thus, unintentionally perpetuate the negative stereotypes of that era.

Another chapter is devoted to a smaller conflict in 1899, usually referred to as the Herne “revolt,” which was largely confined to Polish-speaking miners. Kulczycki insists this strike was a pivotal event in the history of the labor movement in the Ruhr. He argues that it not only revealed the pervasive anti-Polish prejudices among almost all segments of the German population, but actually heightened German xenophobia, making solidarity across national lines even more difficult (pp. 140, 147, 152). Here, and indeed throughout the latter chapters of the book, Kulczycki repeatedly emphasizes how German workers and trade union leaders shared many of the anti-Polish stereotypes of their government, thus handicapping efforts at solidarity across national lines. In fact, on several occasions he specifically blames German xenophobia rather than any type of Polish “backwardness” as the chief obstacle to solidarity (pp. 140, 172, 251-52).

Kulczycki argues that the alternate indifference and hostility of German union leaders to the needs and interests of Polish-speaking miners is one of the main reasons for the creation of a specifically Polish miners’ union, the ZZP, in 1902. However, he insists that this did not represent a triumph of nationalistic/ethnic identity over class identity, at least not at first (pp. 160-61, 165, 170). Indeed, one of the major concerns of the last two chapters of his book is tracing the complicated relations between the ZZP, the Alter Verband, and the Christian Gewerkverein. Kulczycki is often at his best here, highlighting the bases

of both cooperation and conflict between the three organizations, with particular attention paid to the relations during and after the strikes of 1905 and 1912. He argues the miners’ defeat in 1912 and the recriminations which followed, combined with new anti-Polish measures by the government, heightened increased ethnic polarization among the miners on the eve of the war and led the ZZP to increasingly emphasize its nationalist rather than class character (pp. 257-58).

Kulczycki’s book combines thorough research (including the use of Polish as well as German language sources), solid organization, and thoughtful analysis. As a result, it generally succeeds in convincing the reader about the positive role of Polish-speaking workers in the Ruhr labor movement. However, for all its strengths, the book does have a number of weaknesses. One of these is the fact that while he repeatedly stresses the role of Polish community life in promoting militancy and solidarity, he never discusses this issue in detail. Instead, he contents himself with some general observations based on more specialized studies, claiming that these “provide a major portion of the explanation for the solidarity of Polish miners” (p. 7). This may indeed be so, but given the centrality of this phenomenon to his own line of argumentation, it would appear to have deserved more attention. As it is, the linkages between work, community, ethnicity, class, and protest remain somewhat hazy. This problem is aggravated by Kulczycki’s heavy reliance on government reports, newspaper accounts, and other second-hand sources for information on these Polish-speaking workers. Only rarely do we hear the Polish miners speak for themselves and when we do, it is usually from either union or nationalist leaders, who of course are not necessarily representative of the average miner. Thus, it is unclear exactly how ethnic and class considerations may have interacted and shape their behavior.

Another, and probably greater, problem is Kulczycki’s tendency to interpret any form of discrimination (or possible discrimination) as a manifestation of xenophobia and to see this as a constant throughout German society. For example, Kulczycki repeatedly criticizes German trade union leaders, especially those of the socialist Alter Verband, for not recognizing the potential of Polish-speaking miners and not doing more to recruit them. He blames this neglect primarily on the nationalist prejudices of the labor officials. While there is little doubt that many union officials held negative stereotypes of Poles, Kulczycki appears too eager to downplay the efforts that were made and to dismiss other possible motives for the unions’ policies. Thus, while he displays consider-

able sympathy to the organizational dilemmas facing the Polish-speaking union (ZZP), he dismisses possible constraints or difficulties at work in the Alter Verband as mere excuses for deep-rooted xenophobia (pp. 88-89, 128, 140, 184). Nor does he note the fact that German labor leaders also held negative images of many German workers, such as unskilled male and women workers, and sharply criticized them when the latter failed to behave as they labor leaders desired. It seems possible that some of the policies which Kulczycki interprets as signs of xenophobia were part of a larger gulf that separated many union leaders from rank and file workers. Nor does he differentiate as much as he might about the degree and intensity of anti-Polish sentiment among the German population as he might. As his own account makes clear, there were major differences between the attitudes of miners and labor leaders, whose prejudices were tempered by shared experiences at work and recognition of the Poles as possible allies, and government officials or the nationalistic press, who continually whipped up anti-

Polish fears (pp. 25-26, 124-25, 180-81, 235, 246). All too often though, Kulczycki blurs the differences between these groups, tarring all Germans with the same brush of virulent xenophobia (pp. 128, 147, 184, 255). Likewise, when he cites the ostensibly greater efforts made by American unions to recruit Polish miners as evidence of German xenophobia, his information on American developments are drawn from only a few secondary sources and the picture which emerges seems overly optimistic, especially in light of some of some of his own comments about racial stereotypes and fears in America. Again, this is not to deny the existence of nationalist prejudices among German workers and union leaders, but a call for a more nuanced, subtle appreciation of the diverse factors at work in Polish-German relations in the Ruhr.

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