

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gerard Chaliand, Jean-Pierre Rageau. *The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas*. New York: Viking, 1995. xxi + 183 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-85439-4.

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Published on H-Ethnic (February, 1996)

The growing realization among historians of the complexity of human migration during all time periods, but particularly in the last 500 years, cries out for a collection of maps and charts to help scholars and students make sense of this important topic. Of course, to map human migrations—both voluntary and involuntary—over even the past 300 years would require the help of specialists of nearly all geographic areas. Despite the complexity, however, the subject naturally lends itself toward the atlas format. Thus, the *Penguin Atlas of Diasporas* has great potential as reference guide, a potential it fails to realize.

The book, originally published in France in 1991, deals with what the authors describe as the “diasporas” of twelve groups: Jews, Armenians, Romani and Sinti (Gypsies), black Africans, Chinese, east Indians, Irish, Greeks, Lebanese, Palestinians, Vietnamese, and Koreans. The Jews, Armenians, Gypsies, and Chinese receive extensive coverage, while the treatment of the Vietnamese, Greeks, and Koreans is spotty.

The book’s problems start on the very first page as the authors try to define the term “diaspora,” a task at which they fail quite thoroughly. They establish four criteria for defining a diaspora: forced dispersion, retention of a collective historical and cultural memory of the dispersion, the will to transmit a heritage, and the ability of the group to survive over time (xiv-xvii). With the possible exception of the Jews and Armenians, each of these criteria excludes one or more of the groups presented in the book. It is hard to argue that Lebanese, Greeks, or post-famine Irish migrants were anything other than economic emigrants. As the authors’ maps show, even the Jewish and Armenian experiences have been characterized by both voluntary and involuntary movement. Germans, whom the authors consciously exclude, certainly transmitted their heritage in immigrant communities throughout the world across many generations. Poles have established ethnic enclaves in every continent except Africa, and the complexity of Italian migration certainly fits some of the

authors’ criteria. They further confuse the issue by deciding that some of the “diasporas” they intend to map are actually “semi-diasporas,” which occur when the majority or large portion of a particular group stays in the homeland (xiii), a phenomenon that sounds a lot like good old-fashioned migration. The inclusion of some communities is questionable: are the Chinese of Macao and Hong Kong really in diaspora?

The authors seem oblivious to vast bodies of research in American ethnic history, claiming that “white” immigrants to America have “all blended into the American nation” and thus fail the diaspora criteria (xviii). This is an incredible statement from two people supposedly dedicated to studying the movement of ethnic groups and flies in the face of their decision to include five “white” groups—Jews, Irish, Greeks, Armenians, and Lebanese—in their atlas. They also seem unaware of recent studies of the anti-Jewish pogroms in Imperial Russia.

*The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas* attempts to present both a collection of maps and a brief narrative overview of the diasporas. Unfortunately, the maps are too few and the text too cursory to achieve either objective. Many of the maps lack detail. This may be understandable for some less-studied areas of the world, but detailed maps of America’s ethnic and racial diversity have been in print for over a decade. Similarly, maps of Jewish emigration by province in nineteenth-century Russia, which have also been available for some time, would have been a helpful addition.

Worse yet, some maps are inaccurate or poorly labeled. A map showing areas affected by the pogroms perpetrated by Khmielnicki’s Cossacks in the mid-seventeenth century expands their range hundreds of miles to the west and north, areas where the Cossacks never penetrated (41). A map showing Jewish settlement in the U.S. lacks a date (61). Yet another map of the U.S., showing “percentage of population in each state born in Ireland” for 1910, fails to convey the true size of the Irish-American community, since by 1910 there were

large numbers of second- and third-generation Irish immigrants in the U.S. (161). Some parts of the book are simply irrelevant. For example, a photograph with the caption "Macao's Chinese Community," shows a number of young Chinese women doing something behind a screen while the foreground has the blurry image of a passerby stepping in front of the camera (135). What this tells us about Chinese in Macao is anyone's guess.

For scholars seeking a handy reference book on mi-

gration and diasporas, the *Penguin Atlas of Diasporas* is disappointing. For students looking for solid information on some complex questions, this atlas will simply muddy the waters.

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**Citation:** John Radzilowski. Review of Chaliand, Gerard; Rageau, Jean-Pierre, *The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas*. H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. February, 1996.

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