

# H-Net Reviews

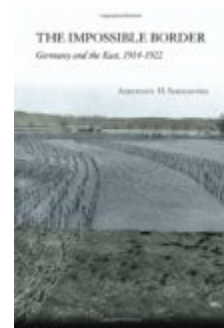
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Annemarie H. Sammartino. *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914-1922*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. 272 S. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4863-8.

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Published on H-German (August, 2012)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing



## With and Without Boundaries

This sharply argued, highly informative book by Annemarie Sammartino explores the shifting, but also overlapping and contradictory, definitions given to “Germanness” during and immediately following World War I. Citizens were defined by law, itself a contested terrain between the Left and Right, especially between socialist-led Prussia and Catholic-dominated Bavaria. In addition, ethnic Germans were scattered in neighboring parts of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Russia. Finally, the actual population of Germany included many non-Germans and immigrants, none of whom were citizens. These separate categories expanded and contracted dramatically, depending on the various phases of conquest and defeat through which Germany progressed. Sammartino carefully plots the ever-changing relationship between territory, nation, and state as it played out in the political and cultural arenas. “Across the region,” she explains, “borders became the symbols and spaces of crisis as states fought over their location and sought to control the people who traversed them” (p. 3).

Sammartino sets these dynamics within the context of the mass migrations occasioned by the break-up of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. Suddenly, national identity became a category both fluid and profound, with an urgent need by the newly constituted nations to define the populations for whom they would take responsibility. By specifying in detail the major clusters among the 1.5 million refugees who came to Germany between 1918 and 1922, Sammartino traces the ways in which poverty, ethnic prejudice, and right-wing

politics determined how each group was perceived and received.

The half million or so Germans who fled the areas ceded to Poland after the war overwhelmed the country’s housing and food networks. Another 70,000 impoverished eastern European Jews escaped to Germany from ongoing religious persecution during the chaotic civil war that followed the dissolution of the Russian empire. A particular target of the German Right, they nonetheless often proved to be a transitory population on their way to other places. The half million anti-Bolshevik Russians who fled west, on the other hand, were welcomed and easily tolerated, just the opposite of the Jewish immigrants, even though in exile both populations lived penurious lives. These groups overlapped the estimated 2.4 million Russian POWs at war’s end, many of whom had worked as forced laborers in farms, factories, and workplaces distributed throughout the country and who now needed a means to travel home.

A rhetoric of expulsion and suffering became firmly entrenched in the German vernacular, and support for German communities outside Germany’s borders became a mainstay of political discourse. The inability to control immigration was also seen as a major fault of the Weimar system and symptomatic of its weaknesses as a form of governance. Borders, Sammartino reminds us, became “a symbol of political impotence and ideological incoherence” (p. 203).

*The Impossible Border* highlights two seemingly iso-

lated situations to demonstrate the contending interpretations affixed to the understanding of ethnicity. The 1919 Freikorps campaign in Latvia kept alive, even after Germany's defeat, the country's imperial dreams to annex the German-speaking areas of the Baltic region. Convinced that a successful military campaign outside Germany's borders could also serve as a base from which to unravel the newly constituted Weimar government, the Freikorps conducted an active and open recruitment drive that resulted in a fighting force estimated between 20,000 and 40,000 volunteers, replete with airplanes, artillery, and armored vehicles. This entire enterprise was viewed as a means to escape temporarily the Freikorps's dependence on Germany's Social Democratic government for financing (its own source of humiliation), with the Latvian campaign continuing the work that the Freikorps had performed already in Germany—suppressing the radical Left.

The Latvian campaign became a last chance for the Freikorps to save a situation rapidly slipping beyond their grasp. Invited by the Latvian authorities, and with support, at least initially, from the victorious Allies, they reconquered the capital city of Riga and systematically rid the region of Bolshevik influence. Since this campaign included extensive rapes of indigenous women, summary executions of anyone suspected of left-wing sympathies, and indiscriminate plundering of sympathizers and foes alike, the Freikorps soon alienated their Latvian hosts and lost their chance to settle as Latvian citizens. The Versailles peace arrangements also isolated them from the rump military establishment in Germany and from their Social Democratic boosters.

The utopian settlement *Ansiedlung Ost* (Settlement East) emerged at the same historical juncture and from the same combination of revolutionary optimism and disappointment in real-world events as the Freikorps adventure, albeit from the other end of the political spectrum. These parallels have led Sammartino to draw analogies between the extreme Left and extreme Right, although the former is more of an antithesis than a complement of the latter. Located just south of Moscow in a quasi-industrialized town more rural than urban, *Ansiedlung Ost* existed mostly in the imaginations of the radical Left. Only 150 people ever actually moved there, even though it attracted many tens of thousands of supporters within Germany itself. Drawn from a host of parties and affiliations from groups to the left of the Social Democrats, its enthusiasts embraced workers' councils as the fundamental structure upon which a socialist society must rest. Unique about the *Ansiedlung Ost* phenomenon was its

ability to focus these various radical tendencies on a single project. They may not have agreed on the proper role, or even the necessity of, the affiliated left-wing political parties, but about the centrality of the councils there was no doubt.

In other respects, too, the Freikorps had little in common with the radical leftists, despite Sammartino's focus on shared images of Russia as virgin and largely uninhabited territory ripe for settlement. The Freikorps aimed to expand Germany's borders and to affirm the country's national identity, whereas the radical Left hoped to abolish borders everywhere and make moot nationalism in any form. "Most *Ansiedlung Ost* members," she tells us, "did not trouble themselves to think about what citizenship they would hold when they left Germany" (p. 81). On the contrary, their rejection of national affiliation was quite conscious. *Ansiedlung Ost* attempted to create a community independent of both the German Social Democrats and the Russian Bolsheviks, whose respective statist solutions the radical Left found objectionable.

To say that *Ansiedlung Ost* "members imagined that they were going to live in a workers' paradise" is an unfair characterization out of step with the rest of Sammartino's book (p. 76). Communal kitchens, which she says were "necessary because the first shipments were expected to be composed primarily of men, who could presumably not cook for themselves," were in truth a long-standing aspiration of the socialist movement because of their potential to free women from domestic toil (p. 79). That *Ansiedlung Ost* supporters discussed such matters in earnest indicates an attempt to attract women to this venture by assuring them that their concerns were an active component of the planning process.

Sammartino refers to *Ansiedlung Ost* as a "mishmash of various, often contradictory utopian visions," another of her unfortunate depictions (p. 76). Aren't contradictory visions axiomatic to emancipatory attempts that fail? And in such moments, is it the initial attempt or the subsequent failure that deserves special focus? There is no question that *Ansiedlung Ost* failed miserably. Except for a few individuals who sent or returned with highly unreliable reports given the rapidly changing and ideologically charged circumstances within Russia, its members traveled there sight unseen. What they discovered was an acute famine, a hostile native workforce, and a lack of housing and jobs. Nor were they prepared for the rudimentary state of Russian industry. The radicals found a safe haven neither in socialist Germany nor in communist Russia. While the Freikorps were success-

fully reintegrated into Germany society during the next decade, the radical leftists all but disappeared as a social force.

For Sammartino, “citizenship is quite literally about an *imagined* community; rather than representing the actual composition of society, it represents its ideal” (p. 160,

emphasis in original). Alternately, all social relations are imagined. And they are real. In the German context, ethnicity and borders emerged as overriding concerns. Sammartino’s carefully researched and insightful study shows that these too remained in a state of flux, despite powerful efforts to affix the real to the imagined.

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**Citation:** Gary Roth. Review of Sammartino, Annemarie H., *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914-1922*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.

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