Religious Guardians of the Peaceable Kingdom:
Winnipeg's Key Social-Gospel Gatekeepers of Canada West

By Richard Sanders

With the ethnic cleansing of Indigenous peoples from the prairies and the arrival of the railway in the 1880s, Winnipeg became the "Gateway to the West." By the onset of WWI, over a million newcomers had been moved in to settle western Canada.

While Canadian churches maintained their blissful silence about the imperial land grab, the mass confinement of Indians on reserves, and the cultural genocide imposed by Christian residential schools, they quickly created morally-indignant narratives to decry the rapid influx of nonAngloSaxons. In reaction to these immigrants, who they considered inferior, Winnipeg's most prestigious clergymen took it upon themselves to become the civil-society "gatekeepers" of fortress Canada. They were soon locked in a battle against the gate-crashing "aliens" who had penetrated the walls of their sacred Peaceable Kingdom.

With heroic tales about the progressive spread of enlightened British culture across the untamed West, Protestant churches saw themselves as the vanguard of a grand imperial project called Canada. In waging their cultural war against First Nations, these self-appointed guardians of national security created popular myths about their valiant mission to protect Canada from savage attacks by religious, political and racial inferiours. Later, when confronted by immigrants with religious beliefs and political loyalties that competed with their own, Anglo-Protestants changed the sights of their xenophobic narratives and worked themselves into a new moral frenzy.

To convey their collective panic, they filled a host of traditional cultural vessels—from sermons, college lectures, missionary tracts and other, more popular religious fictions, like novels—with cautionary tales about strangers. These narratives were like church bells sounding warning of an impending peril. East Europeans—seen as backward, unassimilable and politically radical—were a worrisome new threat to the gatekeepers of Canada's Christian civilisation.

In their propaganda war against unwanted foreigners, Winnipeg gatekeepers demonised "enemy aliens." This was soon followed by their mass captivity in WWI-era concentration camps.

Invading the Kingdom

Between 1871 and 1911, the prairie population grew by 1.3 million: 375,000 in Alberta, 492,000 in Saskatchewan and 430,000 in Manitoba.[1] Most came west via Winnipeg on Canada's new railroad. They were largely Anglos, especially in Manitoba where 64% were British. While Germans and Scandinavians made up 15% of the total, Francophones were only 6%. During this preWWI spurt, the dominance of northwest Europeans began to decline. For example, the prairies' British population fell from 86% in 1901 to 77% in 1911.

During that same decade, east Europeans became far more visible on the prairies. Manitoba's Slavic community of Austro-Hungarians, Russians and Poles, almost quintupled from 12,760 in 1901, to 59,230 in 1911, thus increasing from 5% to 13% of the total population.[2] Most of these Slavs were Ukrainian. About 170,000 of them entered Canada between 1891 and 1914, with a record 22,000 arriving in 1913,[3] on the very eve of WWI.

But gates are not just for entry, they are exits for expelling the unwanted. While between 1903 and 1908 Canada deported 1,401 "undesirables," 1,748 were thrown out in 1909 alone. This followed an influx of aliens fleeing Czarist repression after the Russian revolution of 1905-1907.(See p.38). This record number of deportations was not matched until 1914. During WWI, 5,943 were unceremoniously thrown from our gates.[4]

By war's end, Canada was engaged in "the deliberate and systematic deportation of agitators, activists and radicals," said historian Barbara Roberts. The "threat they posed was not to the people of Canada" but to "vested interests such as big business, exploitative employers, and a government acting on behalf of interest groups." Deportees included opponents of WWI and conscription, militant labour activists and radical socialists. However, the *official excuse* for deportation was often that these people needed government assistance.[5]

Information Gateways

Winnipeg clergy, Charles Gordon, J.S.-Woodsworth and J.W.Sparling, were on the front line of a culture war to maintain the supremacy of Canada's AngloProtestant civilisation. Although they did not control the physical gates through which aliens entered and exited Canada's gates, these Social Gospellers did exert control over the flow of information about aliens.

Social Gospellers were "gatekeepers" in the sense invoked by Kurt Lewin, the Jewish-American father of so-

Gateway to the West

The Cathedral-like rotunda of Winnipeg's Union Station
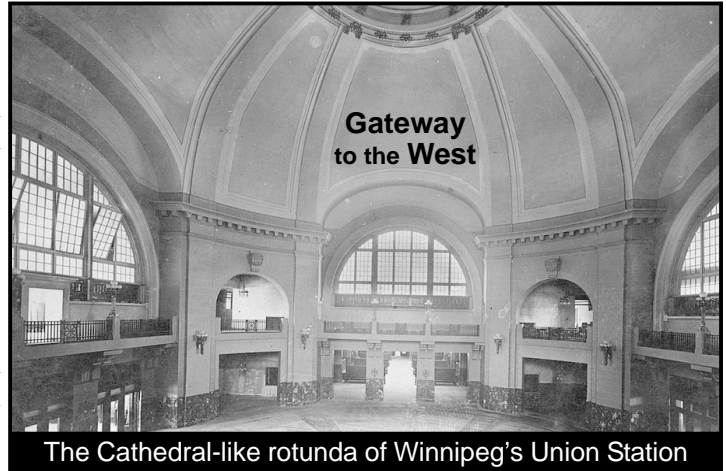
cial psychology who fled Germany in 1933. In 1943, Lewin published his "gatekeeping" theory to explain how individuals manipulate the flow of commodities and information within social systems. Interestingly, he was influenced by political scientist Harold Lasswell's 1920s research on decision-making processes used to create WWI propaganda.

Lewin said that his "gatekeeping" model could be used to understand social organizations and newsrooms. Since then, scholars in many disciplines have used gatekeeping theory to analyse how data is filtered through various processes to construct social realities.[6] As mass communications professors Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos have explained:

> "Gatekeeping is the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day.... [It] determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of the messages, such as news, will be."[7]

Gatekeeping theory explains how Social Gospellers used ethnocentric religious and political filters and select data about aliens that they then crafted into narratives to sway the minds of parishioners, politicians and the public at large.