

Report of the Annual Meeting

Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The European-Canadians in their Press

Watson Kirkconnell

Volume 19, Number 1, 1940

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300206ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300206ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kirkconnell, W. (1940). The European-Canadians in their Press. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 19(1), 85–92. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300206ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1940

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

THE EUROPEAN-CANADIANS IN THEIR PRESS

By WATSON KIRKCONNELL

United College, University of Manitoba

Canadians are becoming progressively aware of an extensive element in the Dominion's population that is of European origins other than English and French. While our distance from the decennial census of 1931 makes exact figures difficult to obtain, rough estimates reckon these European-Canadians at nearly 2,500,000, or a million more than there are whites in the Union of South Africa.

Any general treatment of these groups, within the limits of a single academic paper, would of necessity be so indefinite as to have little value. I am therefore confining myself in this paper to an analysis of the foreign language press of Canada, particularly by way of research into the circulation of these papers. My figures are based for the most part on the *Canadian Almanac* and on *McKim's Directory of Canadian Publications*. I have limited myself to daily and weekly newspapers in European languages other than English and French. The earliest figures obtainable are for 1905, as the *Canadian Almanac* did not publish any press lists before that time. I have therefore concentrated on the statistics for 1905, for the census years 1911, 1921, and 1931, and for 1939, on the eve of the present war. In some of the early lists, circulation estimates are only approximate, but the general picture seems fairly clear. I submit the evidence chiefly for its bearing on the question of the rate and extent of our Canadian assimilation of these European groups.

Most superficial of all as evidence is the actual number of papers published. Back in 1905, there were 18 such papers, issued in 4 languages (German, Swedish, Danish, and Icelandic). By 1911, the total had risen to 33; during the war years it dropped to 29; but it has since risen to 48 in 1931, and to 51 in 1939. The numbers of languages for these respective periods were 11, 10, 15, and 15. The later figures include Jewish papers published in English as well as the Jewish papers published in Yiddish. The languages represented today are German, Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Finnish, Russian, Ukrainian, Slovak, Polish, Croat, Hungarian, Italian, Greek, and Yiddish.

When one breaks the totals down into language-groups, one finds varying rates of growth. Thus the Germans, who had 12 weekly papers in 1905 and 10 in 1911, had only 4 in 1921 and 1931, and 5 in 1939. The Ukrainians, on the other hand, had none at all in 1905, 4 in 1911, and 5, 8, and 9 on the subsequent dates chosen. The Danish and Icelandic papers resemble the German in the reduction today in the number of papers published. Virtually all the others show increases or comparative stability.

The disappearance of a newspaper, however, often indicates the result of a merger. Total circulation is a much more accurate gauge of a newspaper's status. The following table is duly revealing:

TABLE I
(Arranged in descending order of total circulation in 1939)

Language	1905	1911	1921	1931	1939
Jewish	2,000	9,000	35,000	93,000	121,011
Ukrainian		18,000	42,300	59,750	68,434
German	31,480	42,745	40,140	26,177	33,826
Polish	2,000	7,675	15,000	20,250	22,094
Italian		3,100	7,000	16,563	22,081
Swedish	2,500	11,500	8,312	11,675	14,425
Finnish		1,000	5,150	6,700	14,250
Norwegian		5,000	7,047	12,150	10,900
Hungarian		1,500		10,951	9,750
Slovak				9,000	9,500
Icelandic	6,000	8,286	7,600	9,000	9,000
Croatian				2,000	5,750
Russian				5,000	5,463
Greek				2,000	5,750
Danish	835	1,000	1,700	4,000	3,750
Total	44,815	109,806	169,249	289,216	355,234

Here again, there are significant differences. Thus, while the total for all groups rose from 44,815 in 1905 to 355,234 in 1939, the German circulation today, while higher than that in 1931, is lower than in either 1911 or 1921. The increase from 1931 to 1939 is almost exactly accounted for by the circulation of the notorious *Deutsche Zeitung fuer Canada*, established in 1933 by Dr Seelheim, the Nazi consul in Winnipeg. The Norwegian, Danish, and Hungarian circulations also show a slight drop. Otherwise there are marked increases all along the line.

Even yet, however, there are serious defects in the statistics given. There were phenomenal increases in these foreign groups in Canada, both by immigration and by natural increase, during the period in question, and it is only by measuring the newspaper circulation against the group population over a period of years that one can gain a true estimate of the situation. The following table of per capita circulations is best judged by the census years 1911, 1921, and 1931. The figures for 1939 are worked out in terms of the 1931 population and hence make no allowance for populational increment. If this allowance is made, the 1939 per capita rates would, so far as I can judge, be almost identical with those of 1931.

TABLE II
PER CAPITA CIRCULATIONS
(Arranged in descending order of per capita circulations in 1931)

Language	1905	1911	1921	1931	1939
Icelandic	?	?	0.48	0.48	0.48
Jewish	0.12	0.12	0.28	0.47	0.77
Greek				0.33	0.54
Finnish		0.06	0.24	0.32	0.42
Hungarian		0.14		0.28	0.25
Slovak				0.26	0.28
Ukrainian		0.32	0.39	0.24	0.28
Croatian				0.18	0.51
Italian		0.07	0.08	0.16	0.22
Polish	?	0.25	0.28	0.15	0.15
Swedish	?	?	0.14	0.14	0.18
Norwegian		?	0.10	0.13	0.12
Danish		?	0.08	0.12	0.11
Russian				0.08	0.09
German	0.11	0.18	0.18	0.05	0.06
All groups	0.10	0.15	0.16	0.15	0.19 (.15)

(Cf. also: Dutch, no papers at all; Chinese, 0.41; Japanese, 0.35).

The first significant point is that since 1911, when the Siftonian immigration was at its height, the per capita rate for European-Canadians as a whole has remained virtually unchanged at 0.15, or roughly one newspaper to each seven persons. There is a startling reduction in the case of the Germans, who, after emerging from the war with their rate unchanged, dropped in the decade 1921-31 to less than one-third of their former rate. An apparent drop of nearly 40 per cent in the Ukrainian rate during the same period is due, I believe, to a more accurate estimate of the Ukrainian population. The actual number of Ukrainian subscriptions had *increased* by over 40 per cent during the same decade, while the increase by immigration was not commensurate. The same is apparently true of the Poles, many of whom, identified earlier by country of origin, had been listed as Germans, Austrians, and Russians. All of the other nationalities listed have either held their own or have gained ground. In the case of the Finns and of the Central European groups, heavy post-war immigration has, for the time being, heightened the alien character of their communities. The most notable omissions from the record are the Dutch and the Roumanians. The former, numbering over 150,000, are the most completely assimilated of all our European minorities. Over 70 per cent of the Dutch Canadians now report English as their mother tongue, and the rest know English well enough to read our English newspapers. Our 30,000 Roumanians, on the other hand, are too illiterate and too poor to be able to maintain a Roumanian newspaper.

It is instructive, on a basis of the 1931 per capita figures, to make a rough estimate of the number of foreign language newspapers per home in each group, and to consider this as a sort of index of segregation:

TABLE III
FOREIGN LANGUAGE PAPERS PER HOME OF FOUR PERSONS

Icelandic	1.92	
Jewish	1.88	(3.2 in 1939)
Greek	1.32	
Finnish	1.28	
Hungarian	1.12	
Slovak	1.04	
Ukrainian	0.96	
Croatian	0.74	
Italian	0.64	
Polish	0.60	
Swedish	0.56	
Norwegian	0.52	
Danish	0.48	
Russian	0.32	
German	0.20	
Dutch	0.00	
All groups	0.60	

Several warnings are needed in the evaluation of such a record. Illiteracy will reduce the index of segregation, because in backward communities far fewer people will subscribe to a newspaper. The same is true of impoverished and underprivileged communities, e.g. in the Saskatchewan drought areas. It may be that, taking all elements into consideration, 0.96 per family represents a higher degree of newspaper saturation for the Ukrainians than does 1.92 for the Icelanders. On the other hand, length

of settlement in Canada ought to make for fuller integration into Canadian life. Other things being equal, people who have been in Canada for three generations ought to have adopted Canadian ways much more fully than those who have been here for only one.

When all these factors are considered, it is rather striking to find the Icelanders at the top of the list with two Icelandic newspapers to every home. The main Icelandic immigration was back in the 1870's and 1880's, a full generation before the main influx of Central Europeans; yet while illiteracy amongst them is the lowest for all these groups and practically all of them know English, they have retained a very high degree of segregation, partly because of their group settlement and partly because of their remarkably advanced cultural traditions. In 1931, 85.6 per cent of them still gave Icelandic as their mother tongue. Although they total only about 20,000, they have produced in Canada a literature in Icelandic that is far more extensive and intrinsically valuable than that of our 600,000 Germans or our 300,000 Ukrainians, and indeed of any groups except the French and the Anglo-Saxon. They are especially addicted to lyric poetry, the composition of which for weddings, funerals, and spring and summer festivals is an inveterate practice amongst them. They regard themselves as Canadians, but they have no intention of becoming mere imitation Anglo-Saxons. Could the group consciousness of all other Canadian minorities show the same enlightenment and the same lack of political consciousness, our integration as a Canadian nation would present no serious problems. The circulation figure for the Icelanders per capita and per family ought, by the way, to be reduced somewhat, for the two Icelandic weeklies, published in Winnipeg, serve also a small Icelandic community in North Dakota that has no Icelandic press of its own. Even allowing for this, the Icelandic rate is much higher than that of any other Canadian group except the Jewish.

The Jewish rate, on the other hand, ought today, as a measure of segregation, to be sharply increased. Since 1931, Jewish circulations have mounted so much as to give a 1939 rate of approximately three newspapers per family. This is nearly twice as high as a corrected Icelandic rate and incomparably higher than that of the remaining nationalities. Religious consciousness, Zionist nationalism, and the outside pressure of community prejudice all work towards this high degree of segregation. Exogamy, or marriage with Gentiles, is almost non-existent.

The Greek figure is less significant because the sole paper, *Estia*, which is actually printed in New York but is distributed from Montreal, is a literary and family journal rather than a newspaper. The height of the Finnish, Hungarian, and Slovak figures is due to the fact that the bulk of these communities consist of post-war *émigrés*, who brought with them political grievances that tend, at this short removal in time, to preserve their sense of identity. The Ukrainian rate, of virtually one Ukrainian newspaper in every home, is partly the result of recent heavy immigration and partly the result of intense political group-consciousness. In 1931, the illiteracy rate for Ukrainian males in Canada was 10.89 per cent, the highest for any Canadian minority, and when one remembers that many of the Ukrainian settlements were made on marginal lands, which might ill pay for newspaper subscriptions, one will realize that there is really a much higher degree of segregation than the crude subscription rate would indi-

cate. Few minorities are as fully organized and mobilized as the Ukrainians.

The Croatians and the Italians are both slightly above the national average. The former are mostly post-war immigrants, unified by their grievances against the Serbs. As illiteracy is relatively high among them, the circulation index is really an under-estimate of segregation. Our Italians, on the other hand, are largely of pre-war stock (more than one-half Canadian-born). That their subscription rate was almost doubled from 1921 to 1931, and almost trebled by 1939, is directly due, I believe, to incessant and effective interference by the Fascist government of Italy, operating particularly through its consular offices in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. The tone of all three papers in recent years has been rhapsodically pro-Fascist, and the circulation rate would indicate that this influence is being exerted in more than half of the Italian homes in Canada.

An illiteracy rate of 10.74 per cent in the Polish community would suggest a higher segregation index than is indicated by the circulation figures. The main causes are probably recent arrival and the reflex action of Polish nationalism in Europe.

The rates for Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians indicate progressive assimilation, and the pessimistic editors of these papers assure me that two or three more decades will remove the older generation who are their chief subscribers.

The Russian figure of a paper in every third home does not, on the contrary, mean advanced assimilation. Of our 60,000 Russians, two-thirds are Doukhobors, and the illiteracy rate is high. The sole Russian paper has been a Communist tri-weekly, *Kanadsky Gudok*, launched in Winnipeg in 1931; and its alleged circulation of 5,000 copies may mean anything or nothing.

At the very bottom of the list come the German Canadians, the only foreign language press group to show an actual decrease in total subscriptions during the decade 1921-31. This was in spite of a considerable influx of fresh German-speaking immigrants, and indicated a marked trend towards assimilation. The 1931 rate, as indicated above, represents one German newspaper in every fifth home.

As already noted in an earlier paragraph, the picture was altered slightly in 1933 by the founding of a violently pro-Hitler weekly, the *Deutsche Zeitung fuer Canada*. At the time of its suppression in 1939, it had a circulation of around 6,000, or approximately one in every twenty-fifth German-Canadian home. While this is a much smaller ratio of penetration than that of the Fascist Italian press, it nevertheless suggests a circle of Nazi "fifth column" sympathizers ominously much wider than the 500 individuals thus far interned at Petawawa and Kananaskis. To those who know the facts, the dimensions of this pro-Nazi group and the intimacy of its contacts with high circles in our national life are really alarming. Among other things, every former member of the *Deutsche Bund* in Canada is *ipso facto* under grave suspicion.

The most general conclusion from a survey of foreign language press statistics is that assimilation is proving a slow process. Only the Dutch and the Germans show a marked tendency to relinquish their own language and traditions. The Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians trail some distance behind these. All others still show a very high degree of segregation.

Such conclusions correspond very closely to the 1931 census figures for the percentage in each group still using the ancestral language as their mother tongue. These percentages, in ascending order, are as follows: Dutch, 32.8; German, 58.2; Danes, 70.1; Norwegians, 74.5; Swedes, 75.8; all others, over 85. This does not mean that a similar percentage cannot speak English. On the contrary, all these groups are predominantly bilingual, and their younger generations are almost completely so. The point is rather that they are still cherishing an ancestral cultural life, embodied in an ancestral language.

Wisely considered, this need not mean a Balkanization of our national life. The bulk of these people, especially in the second and third generations, regard themselves as Canadians. In the War of 1914-18, the Icelanders, in spite of their high degree of cultural segregation, enlisted in the C.E.F. in greater numbers, in proportion to population, than did the native-born Anglo-Canadians. The Jews likewise show a higher rate of enlistment than the Canadian average, with 37.8 per cent of their males over 21 in the C.E.F., as compared with 31.02 per cent for the general Canadian average. Of these Jewish-Canadian soldiers and officers, 4.52 per cent received decorations for bravery, as compared with 3.38 per cent for Canadians of all origins. The same thing is again being proved true in the present war, as one finds a highly segregated community like the Ukrainians providing its full quota of volunteers. If we can once grasp the conception that Canadian nationality can be loyally expressed in patterns other than English and French, we shall be saved a great deal of anxiety over the future of the Dominion.

There remains, however, a phase of the foreign language press that is distinctly disquieting, viz., the extent to which it has served as a vehicle for foreign propaganda. While most of the periodicals under survey are simply good business propositions, serving profitably to integrate the social and religious life of their communities, there have been others that have been the definite instruments of alien policy. Mention has already been made of the Nazi *Deutsche Zeitung fuer Canada* and of the three pro-Fascist papers, *L'Italia Nuova* of Montreal, *Il Bollettino Italo-Canadese* of Toronto, and *L'Eco Italo-Canadese* of Vancouver. Equally intrusive in their propaganda are a group of Communist newspapers: *Kanadsky Gudok* (Russian) of Winnipeg; *Farmarski Zhitia* and *Narodna Gazeta* (both Ukrainian) of Winnipeg; *Glos Pracy* (Polish) of Toronto; *Kanadai Magyar Munkas* (Hungarian) of Toronto; and *Vapaus* (Finnish) of Sudbury. These represent 100 per cent of the Russian newspaper circulation in Canada, 31 per cent of the Ukrainian circulation, 13.8 per cent of the Polish circulation, 41 per cent of the Hungarian circulation, and 38.5 per cent of the Finnish circulation. Each seems to be in good financial condition, and each serves up in its own language what appear to be identical "directives" from Moscow. While not nearly as virulent in temper as the Anglo-Saxon Communist press in Canada, these foreign language echoes of Stalinism are likewise all true to their master's voice. Nevertheless the fantastic explanations that they gave of the Russo-Finnish War have done much to dismay their subscribers, and their influence is probably on the wane.

The total circulation of the various propaganda papers in Canada in 1939 was 68,044, or 19 per cent of the foreign language press circulation.

The remaining foreign language papers, apparently representing more than four-fifths of the European-Canadians, have been unanimous in their hostility to the aggressor states and in their loyalty to Canada.

It is obvious, from all this, that the present days of crisis call for discrimination based on knowledge. Next to the Dutch, our 600,000 German-Canadians are the most completely Canadianized of all our European groups and any attempt to penalize them as a group would be utterly unjust and irrational. On the other hand, into about 4 per cent of all German-Canadian homes (chiefly in western Canada) a Nazi press has for six years been pouring virulent propaganda, and among a comparable 4 per cent of the German-Canadians the Deutsche Bund has been assiduously building up a "fifth column," whose first loyalty, by the very oath of membership in the Bund, is to Adolf Hitler in person. While we must be scrupulously just to the loyal 96 per cent of our German-Canadians, we cannot be too scrupulously vigilant against the traitorous 4 per cent, the overwhelming majority of whom are still at large today.

DISCUSSION

Mr Adair suggested that the desire for newspapers in Canada amongst foreign groups might arise because these people on coming to Canada realized for the first time the possibilities of having a press. Mr Kirkconnell said that in many cases the Canadian foreign language press came in the first place as a result of business enterprise on the part of some individual business man or journalist. He said that there was a very active political press in those parts of Europe from which the New Canadian groups came. He pointed out that in some cases the foreign language press reflected in Canada the political divisions within the European countries, and that many of these papers were edited here by political exiles who are men of considerable education. Mr Glazebrook asked if it were possible to discover the extent to which foreign-language papers printed elsewhere are read in Canada. Mr Kirkconnell replied that this was difficult to determine, but that his impression was that such papers did not circulate extensively in Canada.

Mr Brown pointed out that some New Canadian papers are published by Canadian organizations such as churches with the definite purpose of presenting a Canadian point of view. Is this category, he asked, numerous and significant? He asked also if there were any cases where Anglo-Saxon interests had co-operated with a new Canadian group in the publication of a paper. Mr Kirkconnell said that the church papers were almost entirely religious in subject-matter, and were not numerous. There were no important instances of Anglo-Saxons having a hand in the publication of one of the secular papers, except perhaps as a temporary expedient just before a federal election.

Mr Saunders asked to what extent these papers were local in character, and to what extent they used material secured from some central office or syndicate. Mr Kirkconnell said that for the most part the papers had their own editorial policies, were independent in outlook, and garnered their own news with the help of scissors. Notable exceptions were a few

propaganda papers (Communist, Nazi, and Fascist), which had a direct and obvious tie-in with Moscow, Berlin, and Rome.

Mr Sage asked what percentage of the papers were published in the various sections of Canada. Mr Kirkconnell said that the provincial distribution was as follows: Maritimes 1, Quebec 6, Ontario 20, Manitoba 22, Saskatchewan 4, Alberta 1, and British Columbia 6. He said that 35 years ago there had been seven German newspapers in Ontario, whereas now there were none. There had recently been an unusual back-drift of Central European immigrants eastwards from the Prairies towards the industrial towns of Ontario; and this had resulted in the establishment of several new papers (Ukrainian, Finnish, Polish, Italian, Hungarian, Jewish, and Croat) in the city of Toronto.