

The globalization of fire: Germans and the forests of South America (Brazil, Argentina and Chile)

Fire has been a central aspect and a quite often neglected topic concerning the presence of German-speaking groups in many countries of South America. Overall, German migration in the continent began in the 19th century and lasted up to the 1950s, helping to shape different environments. Despite of the weight of German migration towards south American urban areas, most Germans settled upon forested territories. The most affected countries in this regard were respectively Brazil, Argentina and Chile. Forest colonization can be thus described as an overwhelming feature of such transnational/transregional migration and the emergence of a culturally diverse German rural community in South America was based on the massive enforcement of fire in the newly-opened agrarian frontiers.

Forest colonization as well as fire were not a novelty in the history of the expansion of German-speaking groups, though; Across many centuries, German colonization of central and eastern Europe (*Ostsiedlung*) very often resorted to flames to convert forests into arable. However, in South America German forest colonization traversed the 19th and 20th centuries and such a development could be observed by many actors with different social, academic and cultural backgrounds who were also able to dispose of modern media to document the settlement of the newcomers. German migration to Brazil and Argentina meant a close relationship with the biome *Mata Atlântica* and its various ecosystems; in Chile, Germans mostly handled the *Selva valdiviana*, a remarkable example of temperate evergreen forest.

Germans were historically reputed across the three south-American countries as very efficient colonists and skillful farmers. Though, the insistence by the Germans in managing land and agriculture through fire frustrated many actors engaged in promoting migration. Very soon state officials, intellectuals and others despised German fire; many considered them as instigators of the “barbarian” forms of native agriculture and traitors of progress – symbolized by modern-rational agriculture and its heroes, Germans like Albrecht Thaer and Justus Liebig. European observers lamented also the supposedly low-level of

sophistication concerning agricultural techniques and accusations of cultural decadence emerged in some places.

In this paper I aim at challenging historical narratives concerning fire. The application of fire for land clearance and for agriculturalist purposes should be regarded into a global/entangled approach; Sources like administrative records, periodicals and secondary sources pin out that fire – contrarily to current bibliography in Latin America and in Europe – was a frequent player of rural life up to the 20th century in many regions of central, eastern and northern Europe. Since the Enlightenment, however, fire has been under pressure in Europe, but due to mass migrations in the Atlantic world, fire could be also transferred into South America where it got in touch with other igneous traditions. Fire has remained in South America highly controversial too and the broader topic of a global history of German fire contains several elements to defy Eurocentric, postcolonial and environmentally-deterministic approaches and assumptions.