

New Germans

Multicultural hysterics

BERLIN

The harsh reality of immigrants who can't or won't fit in

HYSTERIA has its roots in personal issues which are long-suppressed and unresolved, said Sigmund Freud, whose 150th birthday (on May 6th) will be widely commemorated in the German-speaking world. Even if Freud's ideas seem simplistic today, they may help to explain the German penchant for getting into a tizzy over long-standing, half-hidden problems that suddenly seem impossible to escape.

Take Germany's school system, whose inefficiency and social injustice have been an open secret for decades. When, in 2001, an OECD study actually spelled out that unpleasant truth, it put the entire country in a state of shock.

In another encounter with harsh, partially suppressed reality, the Germans have just woken up to the fact that they face big problems with the social integration of immigrants. This time, the wake-up call was a letter from the teachers of the Rütli school in Berlin, whose pupils are mainly Turkish and Arab. Close our school, they begged, because our students are so violent that teaching has become all but impossible. The debate has been sharpened by last week's guilty verdict on a young Turk who killed his sister after she "dishonoured" her family with her western lifestyle.

Hardly a day now passes without a new proposal to address the cultural and social problem of integrating migrants. On the left, people want to get rid of the Hauptschule, the bottom layer of a widespread selective secondary school system. On the right, there have been calls to punish youths whose behaviour shows they are not willing to integrate—by expelling them from school or even sending them to a "taster jail". Chancellor Angela Merkel will soon convene an "integration summit" to air these and other ideas.

For outsiders, it is hard to understand the fuss. Compared with France and Denmark, Germany wouldn't appear to have much of a problem with its immigrants, particularly in view of their large numbers. The country's residents include 6.7m holders of foreign passports, making up 8% of the population. Then there are 7m German citizens classed as having a "migrant background"—this includes the children of mixed or immigrant parents and ethnic Germans who have come from eastern Europe (mostly knowing no German). Yet there are few slums comparable to France's *banlieues*; and during the "car-

toon wars" in February, Germany was an island of relative calm.

Still, it would be wrong to call integration in Germany a success. Youngsters with foreign roots have difficulty finding a niche in society—in large part because of flawed immigration, education and labour-market policies. More than other European countries, post-war Germany attracted low-skilled immigrants—many of them "guest workers", who were expected to go home one day. Many Turks, in particular, never did. This has left Germany with a large cohort of "second-generation" immigrants with origins in poor parts of Turkey and little hope of social or educational success.

Often speaking German badly, it is Turkish boys, especially, who end up in the Hauptschule. Even if they do finish school and get vocational training (40% do not), they have a hard time finding a job. At 26%, unemployment among immigrants is more than twice the national average.

Add in demography, culture and religion and it is easy to see why things may get worse before they get better. Youths with a migrant background will soon outnumber native Germans in some big cities. Feeling rejected by mainstream society, many resort to violence or stay in ethnic ghettos. Some feel attracted by Islamist organisations, which have been growing of late, albeit very slowly.

Although much of this was predictable, the very issue of integration has long been a taboo subject, says Klaus Bade of the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies at Osnabrück University.

Still yearning for cultural homogeneity, conservatives refused to accept that Germany was a country of immigration. Some on the left were also in denial: they rejected anything that smacked of putting pressure on immigrants to integrate, seeing such talk as an echo of fascism. Meanwhile some politicians play to the gallery; in a sop to nativist sentiment, the governments of the states of Hesse and Baden-Württemberg developed "naturalisation tests" with questions on culture and politics.

Unsurprisingly, polls show that immigrants do not feel welcome. More worryingly, according to a study by Bielefeld University, Germans seem to be increasingly xenophobic: 61% agree that "there are too many foreigners living in Germany", compared with 55% in 2002. And racial violence is rising again. This week, an Ethiopian scientist with a German passport was almost beaten to death.

Still, there are signs that Germany is inching toward a more realistic approach. Although flawed in some ways, a new immigration law is the first to accept the need for active measures to promote integration, albeit only through language classes. And even some conservative state governments have launched decent integration

plans. The state of North Rhine-Westphalia, for instance, governed by a coalition led by the right-of-centre Christian Democrats, now boasts an "integration minister", Armin Laschet, who berates his own party for being late to recognise reality.

The integration summit, due to be held before the summer break, could mark another step forward. Yet to make a real difference, says Mr Bade, the meeting must generate some smart thinking on how to ensure equal opportunities for people with an immigrant background, particularly the young. Above all, he says, they need more teachers, smaller classes and schools that operate for longer hours.

Such action will take time to work, of course. An even harder task will be to convince Germans that immigration need not hurt them. It will take brave and imaginative politicians to persuade the nation that it may need to take in even more foreigners, given its demographic profile and the global competition for talent. ■