

# Germany on the move

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DEUTSCHE IM AUSLAND -  
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The most disturbing aspect of the present crisis in Germany is the growth in support for the Republicans of the far right and the emergence of associated radical youth groups such as skinhead gangs with allegedly patriotic leanings. Here, general anxiety about the future manifests itself in an aggressive preoccupation with the perceived threat posed to the Germans by outsiders. There has been a rising tide of violence against *Gastarbeiter*, asylum seekers, Jews and Gypsies. There has been hostility towards the flood of refugees, many of them of German origin, from eastern Europe and Russia. The resentment felt by *Wessis* towards *Ossis* has emerged in citizens of the old Federal Republic making "foreigners" out of their new fellow-citizens in the reunited Germany.

Violent scenes such as those witnessed in Rostock, Hoyerswerda and Eberswalde raise inevitable questions. Is history repeating itself in Germany? Should Germany's foreign minorities and her neighbours fear a new Reich? Were the prophets of doom such as Günter Grass justified in warning that reunification would merely revive the state which had perpetrated the Holocaust? *Deutsche im Ausland - Fremde in Deutschland*, edited by Klaus Bade, is a comprehensive survey of migration patterns, past and present. It provides a historical perspective which reveals the current situation in Germany and central Europe to be both more complex and less "abnormal" than is commonly believed.

The first chapters are devoted to the past migrations of the Germans themselves. From the Middle Ages onwards there was a continuous process of eastward migration, which created a pattern of ethnic coexistence in eastern Europe and Russia which only broke down in this century. From 1880, the major trend was to the west, with nearly 5 million Germans emigrating between 1840 and 1900 alone. Most went to the United States, though the book also traces the history of migrants to Latin America, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere.

Those Germans who left Europe were on the whole integrated into the societies they joined; but those who now migrated eastwards endured a more traumatic history. The emergence of nation states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embroiled these groups in conflicts which are still to be resolved; their descendants appear in the second half of the book as refugees eager to return to Germany in the 1990s. Ironically, they are now often regarded as unwelcome aliens threatening the stability and prosperity of the new Germany.

The history of foreign minorities in Germany long predates the Reich of 1871, but its creation transformed their situation. The late nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the most massive human migrations in Europe since the Germanic *Völkerwanderung*. While Germans emigrated to America, the demand for labour in the booming industrial centres of the Ruhr and on the Prussian estates was met by Poles. At the same time, the Reich served as a transit corridor for millions of eastern Europeans and Russians migrating to the new world.

Werner Sombart described Imperial Germany as an ant heap, a seething mass of peoples on the move. What fascinated Sombart as an economist aroused alarm and often panic among government officials and nationalist polemicists. Elaborate measures were taken to control immigration, limit the seasonal visits of Polish farm labourers and regulate the passage of migrants in transit. But the conviction that all of these measures had proved inadequate was one of the major inspirations of Nazi policy. After 1939, the regime embarked on an unparalleled process of (to use the current phrase) ethnic cleansing and reorganization. German minorities in Slavic areas were brought "home into the Reich". Slavic minorities were forced to move, though the necessities of war production later forced the import of slave labour from these very groups. Jews and Gypsies were brutally eliminated.

The débâcle of 1945 unleashed further massive upheavals. The Allies had to deal with over 10 million "Displaced Persons", largely from eastern Europe. As these were repatriated, often forcibly and against their will, a flood of German refugees moved west, fleeing from revenge at the hands of the Slavic states and from the communist regime in the eastern zone of occupation. The refugees both shaped the character of West German society and supplied the labour needed for reconstruction and subsequent dynamic growth. The collective effort was so successful that it generated an insatiable demand for labour which was only met by another influx of foreigners: *Gastarbeiter* from southern and south eastern Europe guests who were never meant to stay. To this day, German governments have failed to change the status of these ethnic minorities, some now in their third generation.

This ambivalence has been brought into sharp focus by the dramatic events of the past few years. The upheavals in eastern Europe and elsewhere have brought three distinct pressures to bear on Germany. First, the collapse of communism and the chaotic conditions in former communist states

have reactivated a westward migration of ethnic Germans from as far away as Siberia. All are welcome in Germany, since its legislation automatically recognizes citizenship for any who have retained their ethnic culture, even if they cannot speak German. Second, the terminal crisis of the GDR brought another flood of migrants across the border immediately before reunification. Third, Germany's liberal asylum laws have attracted more Third World asylum seekers than any other European country. In 1989 alone, the total number of migrants in these three categories was about 850,000.

We cannot understand the pressures on contemporary Germany unless we understand this migration and its complex origins. History did not come to an end in Germany when the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989. On the contrary, the past returned to haunt a prosperous West German population that had begun to live without it. Ethnic Germans revived memories of the German-Slavic coexistence and conflict which culminated traumatically in the Nazi period. East German migrants revived memories of the price that all Germans had to pay for the Holocaust. Asylum seekers are guaranteed entry by Article 16 of the Constitution, which is itself a memorial to the intolerant nationalism of the past.

The authors conclude that the problems of migration should only be tackled on a European basis. They do not appeal for sympathy for the Germans. Indeed, a comparison between Germany and other EC countries is missing - even the briefest sideways glance at Britain and France would surely have been telling. They do not excuse violence against foreigners. Their book places current events in historical perspective without relativizing them. Its plea for historically informed debate and positive government and EC action and planning deserves as much attention in the British media as the skinheads of Rostock and Hoyerswerda.