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Europe Takes a New Look at American Immigration

By Walter D. Kamphoefner

Many countries of contemporary Europe, from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, are currently experiencing a rôle reversal in the realm of migration. In contrast to the century before World War I, when Europe exported some 60 million people to other continents, most Western European countries today, including some such as Spain and Italy that were until recently significant sources of labor migration to Germany or France, are now experiencing sizeable population influxes from within and beyond Europe. The presence of these newcomers has stirred up nativist movements and sparked debates over citizenship laws, naturalization, bilingualism, and cultural and religious pluralism. As European scholars are beginning to realize, these same conflicts and debates have been experienced before by natives of their lands—as immigrants to America.

The United States has long been a screen upon which Europeans projected their fondest hopes and their wildest fears. Certainly it is the first place they look for evidence that the Melting Pot or multicultural societies can (or cannot) work, as Nancy Green has recently demonstrated for France ("*Le Melting-Pot: Made in America, Produced in France*," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999), 1188-1208). The role of the United States in the formation of national identity is perhaps nowhere stronger than in postwar Germany, for the obvious reason that many homegrown sources of identity were so thoroughly discredited by the Nazi era. In the last two decades, German migration scholars have taken the lead in juxtaposing the experiences of their homeland as a country of emigration with its current role as Europe's leading country of immigration—drawing upon a usable past in an appeal to the public and to the Conservative political establishment, which has often closed its eyes to Germany's increasingly obvious situation as a de-facto country of immigration.

Perhaps the German scholar most active in juxtaposing the German emigrant and immigrant experiences is Klaus Bade. As early as 1982 Bade hosted a symposium entitled "Vom Auswanderungsland zum Einwanderungsland?" which brought together historians, demographers, economists, sociologists, political scientists, and legal scholars, as well as practitioners working with foreigners in Germany—an international group comprising not only West Germans and Americans, but also including scholars from France,

Sweden, Greece, Italy, and even East Germany. In the preface of the resulting two-volume collection with the title: *Auswanderer, Wanderarbeiter, Gastarbeiter* (Ostfildern, 1983), editor Bade stated clearly:

In assessing the social problems that are associated with the transformation from a *Gastarbeiter* population to an immigrant minority, and for an understanding of the situation of the foreign population in the immigration process, the experiences of the classical countries of immigration and that of the immigrants themselves are useful, including those of millions of Germans in the 19th century, who were once just as "foreign" overseas as foreigners are in Germany today.

This line of approach has been continued by Bade down to the present. It helped to shape the contours of the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies [IMIS] which he founded at Osnabrück in 1991. IMIS is an interdisciplinary institution which combines historical and contemporary studies of ethnicity and migration to, from, and within Germany and Europe. It is reflected in the titles of other books Bade has written or edited, for example *Deutsche im Ausland, Fremde in Deutschland* (Munich, 1992), an edited volume whose title translates as *Germans in Foreign Countries, Foreigners in Germany*. Another of his edited collections, whose title translates as *Peoples across Borders; Borders across People: The Multicultural Challenge* (Herné, 1995), takes an essayist's look at some of the same immigration issues, but on a European-wide basis, and once again includes essays examining the U.S. (as well as the Australian) experience. Bade has also collaborated with American scholar Myron Wiener on the steering committee for a 5-volume series, "Migration and Refugees," on patterns and policies regarding contemporary migration in Germany and the United States.

An important source of institutional support for immigration research was a concentration area in North American Studies established by the Volkswagen Foundation in the late 1970s and continued through the 1980s. It promoted comparative approaches and specifically mentioned "problems of emigration and immigration, minority groups, ...and socialization." Encouraging "European-North American scholarly cooperation," it demanded that doctoral candidates funded under this program work together with American scholars or institutions. The bulk of the scholars

(Continued on p. 8)

Europe Takes a New Look...

(continued from p. 1)

engaged in "transatlantic juxtaposition," Americans as well as Germans, have enjoyed the support of the Volkswagen Foundation in their projects and symposia.

Wolfgang Helbich wrote in the introduction to the Volkswagen-financed immigrant letter anthology that he co-edited: "the editors of this volume can at least assert that they were attracted to German immigrant letters undoubtedly more because of this reversal, this possible mirror effect—yesterday Germans as 'Gastarbeiter' in America, today foreigners as a minority among a German majority—than through any patriotism, germanophilia, or enthusiasm for the 'overseas Germans'" (*Briefe aus Amerika* [Munich, 1988], 7). A still more direct and explicit comparison of the German experience as immigrants and as a host country respectively is apparent even in the title another of Helbich's essays, which roughly translates as: "Yesterday's Gastarbeiter?—German Immigrants to the USA," first delivered in a series of university public lectures commemorating the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage.

Another historian who has reached out to an even larger audience is Willi Paul Adams, with a 43 page booklet whose original title translates "Germans in the Melting Pot of the USA: Experiences in the Largest Immigration Country for Europeans" (A revised English version appeared as *The German-Americans: An Ethnic Experience* [Indianapolis, 1993]). Here the comparisons with contemporary Germany are implicit rather than explicit, though a mere glance at all the German-language illustrations from the U.S. shows unmistakably that immigrants were in no hurry to disappear into the melting pot. That these comparisons are intended is nowhere clearer than from the name of the series in which the booklet appeared: "Miteinander leben in Berlin: Living with one another in Berlin," published by the Special Commissioner for Foreigners of this city-state.

One might ask to what degree this approach to migration and cultural pluralism has penetrated down to the general public,

or whether it has largely been restricted to the refined atmosphere of academic ivory towers, in effect preaching to the converted. One sign of broader reception is simply the size of some of these print runs. Adams' booklet is in its third German printing with a total run of 15,000. Bade's 1992 volume was a book club selection and reached a combined circulation of over 30,000; his 1995 work is approaching 14,000 in sales.

A second indicator is the penetration of this approach deeper into the provinces, as witnessed by titles such as one that translates as *Foreigners in Westfalia, Westfalians in Foreign Countries* (ed. Gisbert Strottdrees [Münster 1996]). Much more ambitious is an exhibition and associated catalogue which opened last year at an open-air museum mostly devoted to the normally conservative topic of rural material culture, entitled: *Fremde in Deutschland—Deutsche in der Fremde* (Cloppenburg, 1999), with the subtitle *Spotlights from the Early Modern Era to the Present*. Although taking in a much broader scope, it includes a substantial look at German immigrants to North America, and is scheduled to run at four other museums, two of them in the former East Germany.

Another level at which this juxtaposition has been applied is in secondary school materials. Nearly two decades ago, immigration historian Günter Moltmann argued in a special issue of the journal *Amerikastudien* (vol. 27:3 [1982]):

A study of European immigration to the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries is not only a matter of historical retrospect, it is a study of social problems of today as well. . . . Like former immigrants to America, strangers in Germany experience language barriers, schooling problems, ghetto life, the formation of a sub-culture, hostility from the dominating society, melting pot ideas, development of multi-culturalism, etc. . . . [I]t can be rewarding to include immigration history in the curricula of German schools.

And a 1988 collection edited by Dirk Hoerder, with the unmistakably juxtaposed title *Einwanderungsland USA, Gastarbeiterland BRD* (Berlin-Hamburg, 1988), includes a chapter providing instruc-

tional materials for the secondary level.

Such suggestions have been very aptly applied in a recent German social studies textbook, aimed at roughly the junior high level. It includes a whole chapter entitled "Seeking your fortune abroad," using as an epigraph the translated inscription on the Statue of Liberty. The chapter has sections entitled "Germans in Faraway America" and "Foreigners in Faraway Germany," presenting much primary source material from immigrant letters and newspapers (*Gesellschaftslehre Global 1* [Frankfurt am Main, 1998], chapter by Volker Werner, pp. 100-121). While one might write this off to the Social Democratic leanings of the author, the larger point is that the book passed muster with one of Germany's leading textbook publishers.

The American example occasionally provides ammunition for the other side as well. A 1992 article in one German popular magazine, entitled "How Many Foreigners can a Country Stand?", turns to the U.S. for many of its scenes of horror (Peter F. Speier, "Wie viele Fremde kann ein Land vertragen?" *P.M. Magazin*, 6/1992, pp. 60-66). Its one-sided perspective presents the "old stock" black ghetto without any awareness of prospering Afro-Caribbean immigrants, cites Chinese gangs without any mention of "cybercoolies," and alleges that the U.S. "Millionaire" immigration visas are reserved for rich "white Europeans." Other anti-immigrant arguments forego such racism, but assert a fundamental difference between "crowded" Germany and the wide open spaces of the U.S. or Canada, blissfully oblivious of the overwhelmingly urban concentration of recent immigrants to these countries. But the long-term successful acculturation, indeed the near-disappearance of Germans as an ethnic group in contemporary America—and this despite the size and institutional completeness of the ethnic group and the degree of concessions made to them in the 19th century in areas such as bilingual education—presents a strong argument for greater patience and more of a long-term perspective in dealing with newcomers to postwar and post-Wall Germany.

Though Germany now attracts an immigration second in size only to the U.S.—a

combined function of its size, economic prosperity, liberal laws toward asylum seekers and ethnic Germans, and a geographic situation on the boundary between eastern and western Europe—it presents merely an extreme case rather than an exception to the normal European experience with immigration. Perhaps members of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society can provide a spark by drawing some of the same transatlantic juxtapositions that have been posed in Germany, and add a note of empathy to public discourse on the issue of immigration in their lands of origin and/or research specialization.

Walter D. Kamphoefner is Professor of History at Texas A & M University. He spent the 1998-99 academic year as a Senior Fulbright Lecturer in immigration history at the University of Osnabrueck, Germany.