

The Helmut Oxner Murders

Evolving Violence in Xenophobic Germany

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An examination of the explosion of anti-foreigner violence in Germany, the historical context that bred resentment, and subsequent changes in German policy towards immigrants.

Since the end of the Second World War in 1945 Germany has increasingly become central for immigration to Europe (Ulman, Eichengreen and Dickens). This increased immigration has caused ethnic issues to resurface in a nation already shrouded in guilt over the actions of the Nazis. One instance of the ethnic violence that has occurred in Germany over the past 60 years is the attack committed by a German citizen named Helmut Oxner on three foreigners. On June 24th, 1982, Oxner shot three foreigners (two African Americans and an Egyptian) to death, and then committed suicide before the German authorities could apprehend him. Oxner's brutal killing of the three foreigners is just one example of the racist and xenophobic acts that have been committed during this era of German history. The German government is slowly but surely cracking down on violence and hatred against minorities but xenophobia is not their only problem. Within this essay we will be discussing the issues that have contributed to the intensification of xenophobia in post-war Germany. These issues include changes made to immigration policies to curb immigration problems and improve the integration of minorities and the growth of the German neo-Nazi movement. Oxner's right-wing extremist views are an example of a problem that Germany has faced for the past 60 years. The changing face of immigration in Germany offers hope to curb that problem.

The Changing Face of Immigration in Germany

Phases in the History of German Migration, 1945-1997 (Münz)	
1945-1949	Mainly immigration of ethnic German refugees and expellees from the East and remigration of victims of Nazi Germany.
1949-1961	First peak of migration from East Germany (German Democratic Republic) to West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany).
1961-1973	Active recruitment of foreign labor by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) (guest workers); rapid growth of foreign population.
1973-1988	Recruitment stop; failed attempts to reduce the number of foreigners living in the FRG; consolidation and further growth of the foreign population in West Germany by way of family reunion; recruitment of foreign labor by the German Democratic Republic (GDR).
1988-1991	Immigration of ethnic Germans (<i>Aussiedler</i>), asylum seekers, refugees, new labor migrants; second peak of migration from East to West Germany.
After 1992	Introduction of new restrictions against the immigration of <i>Aussiedler</i> and asylum seekers.

Post War "Guest Worker" Boom

Large inflows of immigrants with non-German ancestry began in the second half of the 1950s. In response to a labor shortage prompted by economic recovery, Germany signed a series of bilateral recruitment agreements, first with Italy (1955), then with Spain (1960), Greece (1960), Turkey (1961), Portugal (1964), and Yugoslavia (1968).

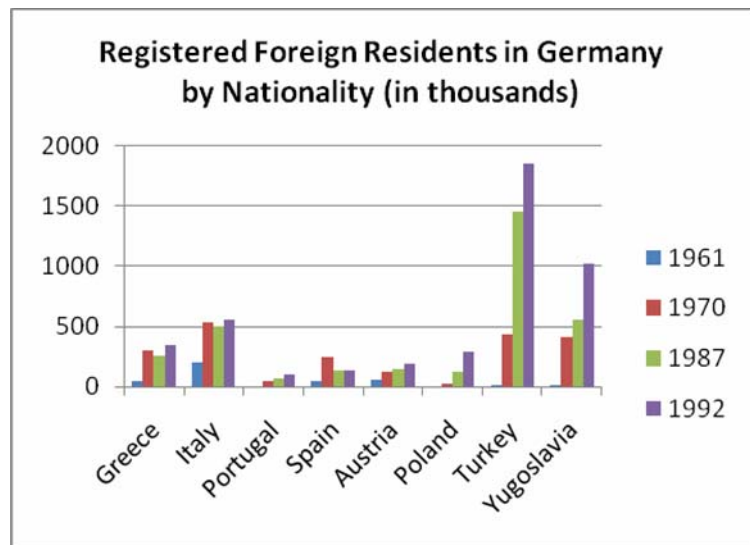


Figure 1: Registered Foreign Residents (Gordeeva)

The core of these agreements included the recruitment of *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers), almost exclusively in the industrial sector, for jobs that required few qualifications. Under the

rotation principle, mostly male migrants entered Germany for a period of one to two years and were then required to return home to make room for other guest workers. This policy had a double rationale: it prevented the guest workers from settling permanently and it exposed the largest possible number of guest workers to industrial work. In 1960, the number of foreigners already stood at 686,000, or 1.2 percent of the total German population. At that point, the most important country of origin was Italy (Gordeeva).

After the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the consequent reduction of the number of German migrants from the GDR, West Germany intensified its recruitment of guest workers. Up until 1973, when recruitment was halted, foreigners increased both in terms of numbers and their share of the labor force.

At the same time, the dominant countries of origin for guest workers also changed. The number of foreigners in the mid 1970s amounted to four million, and their share of the population reached 6.7 percent of Germany's total population. Some 2.6 million foreigners were employed, a level which has not been seen since then. By 1973, the most important country of origin was no longer Italy, but Turkey, which accounted for 23 percent of all foreigners. Other countries of origin included: Yugoslavia (17 percent), Italy (16 percent), Greece (10 percent), and Spain (7 percent) (Gordeeva).

Halting Guest Worker Recruitment

The demand for foreign workers declined in 1973, when Germany entered a period of economic recession, fueled in part by that year's "oil crisis." The government declared a ban on the recruitment of foreign workers, and began to wrestle with how to deal with the still-increasing number of foreigners in the country (Ulman, Eichengreen and Dickens).

A large proportion of guest workers had already acquired residence permits for a longer or permanent duration, attesting to the limits of the rotation principle. In addition, Italians now had the right to free movement across the border, a right extended to all member states of the European Community (EC) in 1968. With the rotation model a distant memory, it was clear that many foreigners were now planning a longer or even permanent stay in Germany (Nickerson).

While many guest workers were leaving, high levels of immigration persisted, due to family reunification of the remaining workers. The number of foreigners thus stayed more or less constant throughout the 1980s at between 4 and 4.5 million. However, the labor force participation of immigrants decreased.

In 1988, the 4.5 million foreigners living in Germany accounted for 7.3 percent of the population as a whole. Some 1.6 million of them were wage and salary earners; another 140,000 were self-employed. The most important countries of origin remained the former recruitment countries. Greece held special status in terms of freedom of movement due to its full membership in the European Community — a status that would also be achieved by Spain and Portugal in 1992.

By this time, a growing number of children of foreign workers were being born in Germany: the second generation. Unlike in the United States, these children were not granted German citizenship at birth and were legally treated as foreigners.

German Nationals

Not all economic and cultural pressure came from foreign immigration; many German nationals also moved into populous areas and competed for jobs. Between 1945 and 1949, nearly 12 million German refugees and expellees settled in Germany. They were either German nationals who had lived in areas intermittently under German jurisdiction prior to 1945, or ethnic

Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. GDR citizens and ethnic Germans coming to West Germany from Eastern Europe and Central Asia hardly ever thought of returning some day to their countries of origin, whereas some of the foreign laborers and asylum seekers did. About two-thirds of these returnees settled in the western part of the country. Their acceptance and integration was eased by two factors: their ethnic origin, and the post-war economic boom (Münz).

Between 1945 and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, 3.8 million Germans moved from East Germany to West Germany. In fact, obstacles like the wall failed to completely stem this flow, and migration from the GDR totaled nearly 400,000 between 1961 and 1988. This immigration was welcomed economically by the FRG's expanding industrial sector and politically as a rejection of the GDR's communist political and economic system.

At the end of the 1980s, the immigration of *Aussiedler* (ethnic Germans, as distinct from East Germans) from Soviet Bloc countries rose dramatically. Up to that point, virtually all *Aussiedler* had come from Eastern Europe, where they had managed to stay despite systematic expulsions in the aftermath of World War II. Between 1950 and 1987, about 1.4 million such *Aussiedler* immigrated to West Germany. Most of them came from Poland (848,000), while another 206,000 arrived from Romania, and 110,000 emigrated from the Soviet Union following the German-USSR rapprochement of the late 1970s and 1980s.

The Growth of Neo-Nazism

The escalation of racism in Germany that accompanied the growth of neo-Nazism can be broken down into three stages:

I. First Phase (~1980-1988):

The continuing growth of immigrants in Germany and the constant struggle for asylum and integration were prominent issues during this phase. Wolfgang Seeger, in the early 1980s, created a brochure entitled *Integration of Foreigners is Genocide* (Harnisch, et al., 266). It describes how state destruction is a product of integration, and the mixing of foreigners with the German population is deemed impossible (266). In the brochure, foreigners who tried to call Germany their “home” are criticized and blamed for the country’s problems.

West Germany experienced a growing number of asylum seekers and started to change its rules regarding immigrants. The number of asylum applicants continued to grow during this phase, from 50,000 to a little over 100,000. West Germany also set restrictions on immigration from non-EC member states and on spousal and children immigration (MGP, 1980-1984). It was reported in 1983 that some 2.3 million people were unemployed, which was believed to be caused by the increasing number of foreigners. Germans claimed these foreigners were “stealing [our] jobs” (Göktürk et al. 502).

This first phase of the escalation of racism also saw an increased number of guest workers in West Germany. East Germany also recruited foreign workers from all over the world: Mozambique and North Vietnam in 1980, China in 1986, and other communist countries such as Angola in 1988 (501-3).

Xenophobia, “an intense dislike and/or fear of people from other countries” and slander against foreigners started to intensify during this phase, and continued to grow, contributing to the escalation during the second phase of racism in Germany (Wikipedia). Turkish jokes in West Germany started to appear, and politicians began to launch verbal attacks (Harnisch et al. 267). Protests against xenophobia also took place on the streets and in the marketplace.

II. **Second Phase (~1989-1992):**

Xenophobia and right-wing violence in Germany began to increase during the mid 1990s-1992 (Human Rights Watch, Section I). A report conducted in October 1992 by the Human Rights Watch, then Helsinki Watch, claimed:

Germany is currently confronted with a political and social crisis that has profound consequences for German citizens, as well as for the foreigners who seek refuge within its borders. . . . Rioting skinheads throwing Molotov cocktails at refugee shelters, onlookers applauding and cheering, slogans such as “foreigners out” and “Germany for Germans,” inevitably recall images of Nazi terror during the Third Reich. Physical injury, fear and humiliation have become a daily experience for foreigners in unified Germany (Human Rights Watch I).

The slow reaction by the German state to respond to the increased violence and hatred allowed anti-foreigner sentiments to flourish and be tolerated and accepted by the nation. However, after several violent attacks and murders occurred, the German government stepped out and sought to combat the violence. Some measures included improving police presence (monitoring, investigating, etc.) and banning neo-Nazi political organizations.

In 1991, the Human Rights Watch also released statistics of right-wing extremism and neo-Nazi groups. The government reported the “existence of thirty neo-Nazi groups and forty-six other right-wing groups, with a total membership of 39,800” (Fullerton 12). The total membership increased in 1992 to 41,900 and continued to grow into 1994 (Fullerton 13). These groups took part in physical violence and a variety of crimes against foreigners.

Despite the government's efforts in dismantling and banning the formation of such groups, neo-Nazism still persisted.

November 9, 1989 marked a prominent day in history when East German border police opened the Berlin Wall. When the borders between East and West were torn down, citizens of the GDR were finally free to go in and out of the West as they pleased. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, on October 3, 1990, the GDR and the FRG reunified (Göktürk et al. 504). In the shadow of Germany's joyous reunification, neo-Nazis were still present, creating havoc and committing murders.

III. Third Phase (~1993-1995):

The phase, which covers 1993 to 1995, focuses on the growing need of asylum. The right-wing violent attacks and mass spread of xenophobia as seen during the 1989 to 1992 phase also led to the restriction of asylum seekers.

The increasing number of asylum seekers during the early to the mid-1990s pushed the German government to place a restriction on the amount of applicants, to "prevent a further escalation of xenophobic violence" (Human Rights Watch I). However, the complete opposite resulted. The asylum debate caused even more violent attacks, and it was suspected that the government was encouraging this hostility, rather than trying to suppress it.

At the time, Chancellor Helmut Kohl was being heavily criticized for how he was handling the asylum situation. In June 1993, he set out to find an end to German right-wing extremism, dedicating almost two years to combating xenophobia and racist violence. In another report by the Human Rights Watch, the steps taken to improve the chaos in Germany were not enough to sufficiently see an improvement. As the report indicates, recommendations were made for a "reevaluation of numerous German laws to remove

discriminatory provisions, a reevaluation of the citizenship and immigration laws, and the initiation of additional protective legislation, including an anti-discrimination law” (Human Rights Watch, Section II).

In the years following 1995, Germans seemed more accepting of foreigners. Millions of non-citizens started to migrate into Germany, citizenship laws were changing (making receiving German citizenship easier), and Germany was finally recognized as an “immigration country” in 2005 (Göktürk et al. 510). Although tolerance and acceptance began to grow, an upsurge in neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic violence erupted. On November 9, 2000, 200,000 Germans marched in opposition to the violence. Despite Germany’s growing acceptance of foreigners, oppression and neo-Nazism still exists.

Post-Citizenship Law Revisions

The changing social positions regarding foreigners and immigration contributed to the polarization of the issue, which helped nurture neo-Nazism. This is reflected in German legislation in the 1980s and 1990s, which gradually reduced requirements for German citizenship for foreign workers.

The 1970s through the 1990s were marked by protests by minorities about restrictive citizenship laws and the lack of legal protection for minorities. Demonstrations ranged from riots and acts of arson, to even cases of self-immolation. Some government policies were blatantly against the growth of the foreign population. For example, in April of 1975 the West German government announced that no foreigners were allowed to move to an area where the percentage of foreigners exceeded 12 percent. This law was repealed in 1976 under constitutional grounds, but the fact that the policy even made it into law is reflective of ethnic German attitudes toward foreigners at the time. Government policy started to change as a result of public outcry in 1978

when Heinz Kuhn, West Germany's first commissioner of foreign affairs, first argued that Germany accept it was country of immigration. Gradually, over the next 25 years, other landmark policies would mold Germany in accordance to Kuhn's vision of the future.

One such act was Germany's participation in The Treaty of Schengen, which removed border checks between EU countries. The treaty was signed in 1985, only a few years after the Oxner murders, and took full effect in 1995. The treaty abolished passport and customs controls at most of the internal borders of European states. This greatly increased the ease of travel for immigrants to Germany, legal or otherwise, as they could now enter the EU via any of the other member states and then enter Germany unrestricted. While many scorned the sudden influx of immigrants, perhaps most notably the Turks, their increased presence in culture and government was very influential in the passage of laws further relaxing restrictions on citizenship.

In 1996, well behind the rest of the western world, the *Bundestag* (German Parliament) passed legislation protecting minority rights. This protected religious practitioners, homosexuals, immigrants, and people of all colors and creeds from discrimination and was a landmark in the history of German civil rights. Like the rights we share in the United States, it stipulated that no person shall be disadvantaged on the basis of their minority status. This action put the German government in direct conflict with the often violent xenophobic ideology of the neo-Nazi movement.

The 20th century came to a close with two major laws affecting naturalization and foreigners. The 1993 Foreigner Law made citizenship more available to non-ethnic Germans. Applicants for naturalization must now give up their previous nationality, have a clear criminal record, and have lived in Germany for anywhere between 8 and 15 years depending on the federal state. The 2000 Reformed Citizenship Law said that a child born on German territory of a parent residing there

legally for 8 years, or 3 years with an unrestricted residence permit, would have citizenship, but with the requirement that the person give up their foreign citizenship by the time she or he turned 23 years of age.

German immigration policy today is a far cry from what it was at the time of the Oxner murders. Workers from other EU states are welcome to work and live as they please and there are fewer barriers of entry for highly skilled immigrant laborers. Naturalization for workers and their children is a simpler, shorter process, and immigrants have legal protection from discrimination. On paper, Germany has embraced itself as a nation of immigration. Time will tell if society follows suit by eliminating neo-nazism and acts of economic and social discrimination.

The end of discrimination within Germany is far from being reality, but in the past twenty years Germany has made much advancement towards a happily integrated society. The push by the German people to embrace a new policy of immigration in which citizenship is more easily attained, is a step in the right direction for Germany and will hopefully only lead towards more integration and acceptance. Along with the crackdown on racism and the argument for integration rather than assimilation Germany is finally on the way to becoming the country of immigration that it wishes to project to the world.

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