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Germany and Her Migrants: The Missing Years

The history of German migration policies was a growth industry during the 1990s. The political battles of the present, such as asylum legislation, integration, and citizenship reform, created growing interest in the German historical experience of migration, migration controls and citizenship law. At the time, the only major work to tackle the subject was Klaus Bade's pioneering study of Prussian migration policies before the First World War, recently republished in an updated edition.[1] Initially, interest in German migration policies was guided largely by two leading questions. Histories of citizenship in Germany tended to adopt a long or a comparative perspective, which sought to test the hypothesis that German citizenship law and its implementation in practice reflected a particularly ethnic German conception of nationhood.[2] Histories of migration policy, by contrast, tended to focus on particular episodes in which a German tendency to view migrants primarily with regard to their usefulness, and not as potential immigrants and future citizens, clearly emerged, especially with regards to histories of the German Empire, the First World War, National Socialism, the Second World War and the post-war treatment of *Gastarbeiter*.

The Weimar Republic, in contrast, was usually passed over in a few pages that highlighted the continuity of labor market control.[3] This state of affairs was remarkable because research on other countries highlighted the interwar period as an epoch of massive change in international migration policies. Race and ethnicity loomed larger than they had before, as indicated by the implementation of a quota system and barred zones in the United States. Moreover, with the First World War came the introduction of documentation requirements and the creation of labor-management bureaucracies that facilitated the distinction between citizens and aliens, as well as attempts to match labor supply to labor demand. Gérard Noiriel had even gone so far as to argue, largely with a view to migration and documentation policies, that the practices of Vichy had their roots in republican reforms of the late 1920s and 1930s.[4]

Jochen Oltmer's magisterial *Habilitationsschrift* closes this gap all but completely. Based on a thorough reading of the archival record and contemporary public debate, his book shows that the transition from the politics of the First World War to the politics of National

Socialism in the years of a labor shortage was more complicated previously assumed. He also highlights that migration policy was a field in which the Weimar Republic's problems emerged with particular poignancy.

Oltmer's account is organized thematically rather than chronologically, though his subjects are arranged in the order in which they emerged as the main foci of internal administrative and public political debate. In the Weimar Republic's early years, these topics concerned ethnic Germans left outside the Empire's post-Versailles borders, prisoners of war and political refugees. In the later years, the position of migrant workers gained more prominence.

While publicly committed to aiding fellow Germans, the republic's practice was ambivalent. The arrival of former residents of Alsace—mostly skilled workers in industries where labor was in demand, from a territory unlikely to be re-conquered soon—was welcome, but emigration of ethnic Germans from areas under Polish control was actively discouraged. The official view of these potential emigrants was less positive, their numbers were larger by several orders of magnitude and maintaining a visible German minority outside Germany's eastern borders seemed a good way to bolster the German case for a revision of the Treaty of Versailles. Migrants from Poland who could not prove they had been persecuted could therefore only expect accommodation in forbidding refugee camps in remote locations.

As Oltmer's third chapter shows, this attitude also shaped the Weimar Republic's response to ethnic German emigration from Russia, which peaked during the famine years of the 1920s. Individual ethnicity was, therefore, not a dominant factor in the treatment of refugees; aliens of all ethnic backgrounds remained in a precarious position in the Weimar Republic, regardless of whether they were former prisoners of war who had opted to stay, or Jewish refugees from eastern and southeastern Europe who loomed relatively large in public debates or refugees from Soviet Russia.

Ethnicity and race also loomed large in debates on the desirability of labor immigration. In general, the attitudes of state governments had more or less come full circle since the days of the empire. Whereas Prussia had been most concerned about the impact of Polish immigrants on national homogeneity before 1914, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg proved most rigid after 1919. However, the majority of migrant workers were interested in jobs in Prussia, in the industrial areas of the Ruhr and, more prominently, in the agricultural east, which

continued to rely on the access to Polish labor markets, particularly for potato planting and harvesting. In theory, the states and the empire had a powerful new tool to control labor migration: the obligatory work permit, issued only if no German applicants could be found for a job. Things were, however, not so simple in practice. Political interest in ethnic homogeneity was equal to interest in increasing the supply of food, a goal that could only be achieved, East Elbian landowners claimed, if Polish seasonal workers remained available to German employers. Immigration was, however, regarded with distaste by the *völkisch* right, Prussia's conservative bureaucracy and the Social Democrats, who viewed Polish laborers as an obstacle to the long-overdue modernization of rural Prussia through mechanization and unionization. The solution, fixed quotas for migrant laborers set to decline every year, proved unworkable, as rural employers turned to undocumented laborers. Moreover, the German government did its bit to undermine respect for legality in immigration matters. Seeking to reimpose a *de facto* policy forcing Polish migrants to return home for part of the year to prevent their settlement in Poland, German officials came into conflict with Polish determination to cut the state's ties to long-term emigrants, and were frequently forced to aid migrants in clandestinely crossing the border, before an unequal agreement could be concluded with Poland in 1927 that confirmed the status of Polish workers as second-class migrants excluded from social insurance and subject to a forced return for part of the year.

Oltmer's comprehensively documented study does more than simply fill a gap in existing research. He unearths a striking pattern to Weimar policies, which could be found in many other fields of policy and may contribute to explaining why successive Weimar governments had such a difficult time in gaining the population's respect. Public pronouncements frequently contradicted secret or semi-secret policies. Official quotas for foreign workers, for example, were unofficially raised and little attempt was made to sanction employers of undocumented workers. Such actions exposed the Republic to criticism from the right and created a climate in which even more restrictive National Socialist policies could acquire broad popular support. Oltmer's book thus treats a question at the center, not the periphery, of the Weimar years.

Notes

[1]. Klaus J. Bade, *Land oder Arbeit? Transnationale und interne Migration im deutschen Nordosten vor dem Er-*

sten Weltkrieg (Habilitationsschrift, [Erlangen, 1979; 2nd edition with a new preface, 2005]), at www.imis.uni-osnabrueck.de/BadeHabil.pdf, February 19, 2007.

[2]. Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Andreas Fahrmeir, *Citizens and Aliens: Foreigners and the Law in Britain and the German States, 1789-1870* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Dieter Gosewinkel, *Einbürgerung und Ausschließung. Die Nationalisierung der Staatsangehörigkeit vom Deutschen Bund bis zur Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Göttingen:

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001); Eli Nathans, *The Politics of Citizenship in Germany: Ethnicity, Utility and Nationalism* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Oliver Trevisiol, *Die Einbürgerungspraxis im Deutschen Reich, 1871-1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

[3]. See Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland. Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge* (Munich: Beck, 2001).

[4]. Gérard Noiriel, *Les origines raciales des Français de Vichy* (Paris: Hachette, 1999).

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