

The Germans’ “Refugee”

Concepts and Images of the “Refugee” in Germany’s Twisted History between Acceptance and Denial as a Country of Immigration and Refuge

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The “Refugee” of the “Summer of Welcome” 2015

“We can tear down the walls!” It was a plain and often-heard message that Angela Merkel offered her American audience in her commencement speech at Harvard University in June 2019, asking the graduates not to lose their belief in the openness of the future; a message so plain that many Germans were a bit embarrassed, considering the speech to be a “wall” in itself—“walled into stereotypes,” as one newspaper put it (Reents 2019). But messages do not need to be sophisticated to teach us complicated lessons. While alluding to famous quotes by US presidents (“Tear down this wall”; “Don’t ask what your country can do for you”; “Yes, we can”) in order to argue for the ability to change, for multilateralism, and for getting rid of barriers of all sorts, Merkel not only challenged Trump, she also presented a historical narrative, one in which she and the country she represents, Germany, having been the model students of US democratization and liberalization efforts, were now taking the lead, drawing confidence and strength from exactly the biographical and historical experiences of wars, walls, and limitations that motivated these US efforts toward Germany in the first place.

Of course, everyone in the audience knew that the specific and real “walls” that Merkel’s metaphorical speech alluded to—Trump’s wall and the Berlin Wall—serve or served completely different purposes in the migration and refugee histories of the two countries: Trump’s wall tried to shut people out, and the Berlin Wall tried to shut people in. While the right to emigrate and to leave a country is protected by international law, the laws to regulate immigration are mostly left to the nation-states. Merkel in 1989/90 left behind her the Berlin Wall that limited her personal prospects and her freedom to travel. But as the head of the German government, she actively participated in the securitization and fortification of the EU border, a border not less costly and inhumane than the US border with Mexico. Under Merkel’s leadership in Germany and Germany’s leadership in the EU, more than twenty thousand migrants and refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean since 2014 alone (“Geschätzte Anzahl der im Mittelmeer ertrunkenen Flüchtlinge” 2012). Under Merkel’s leadership, the EU made a deal with Turkey that shifted the main migration routes across the Mediterranean from Turkey to Libya. And it supported Turkey building a wall on the Syrian border, thereby causing the Syrian refugees and deportees to be trapped in Idlib, where they are now (as of fall 2019) being bombed and sieged and left to die at the hands of Assad’s and Russia’s troops. Merkel’s interior minister Horst Seehofer has been incessantly churning out anti-asylum laws since the formation of the new grand coalition in March 2018, and it is fair to say that her party’s migration politics have been at least partly driven by the xenophobic agenda of the far right already since fall 2015, if not long before.

There are two reasons why Merkel in spite of all this can still claim the moral authority to challenge Trump’s wall, and these are the same reasons why she is still hated by the far right for allegedly being the “refugees’ chancellor” (*Flüchtlingskanzlerin*), allegedly not representing German interests and replacing the German population with a migrant one. Firstly, she realized in 2015, albeit rather late, that policies towards migration need to be multilateral and coordinated with the European partners and also with non-European partners. While up to 2015 Germany relied on being surrounded by so-called safe countries and left it mainly to Italy and Greece to deal with the migrants that were washed upon their shores, Merkel attempted to show solidarity and a human face when in August/September 2015 Hungary shook off all responsibility and left the migrants and protection seekers who had arrived in large numbers over the “Balkan route” altogether to themselves. Confronted with these unregistered people marching by foot toward the Austrian and the German border, Merkel decided to exercise the so-called sovereignty clause of the Dublin Regulation and let them in to Germany in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and also to take pressure from the struggling European partners. Ever since, Merkel has been extremely reluctant toward unilateral solutions.

The second reason for her lasting good reputation in matters of “tearing down walls” is her stubborn insistence that Germany was perfectly able to cope with the so-called refugee crisis in 2015/16. Her claim “Wir schaffen das” (we can manage) did not only reflect adequately the economic and administrative resources of one of the strongest and wealthiest countries in the world. Germany took a small percentage of the number of refugees that much poorer countries like Turkey could take in. It also showed a total absence of racism and Islamophobia: she never utilized culture and religion as arguments, and that earned her the particular hostility of the entire right spectrum as much as the sympathy of the transnationally oriented liberals and leftists around the globe.

The “Summer of Welcome” 2015 has left a deep and dividing mark in German collective memory. The government’s decision not to close the borders, to accept the protection seekers, and, thereby, to stop the chain reaction that had been sparked by Hungary and the Southern and Southeastern European border states went along with a huge wave of volunteer activity among the German population. For a short time, it seemed as if, simply put, the forces of good—solidarity, kindness, hospitality, readiness to help—had revealed themselves in our dark historical reality, against all odds. I was in my hometown in Bavaria at the German-Austrian border at that time and will never forget the invigorated atmosphere of those days, the insurgence of civil society in the name of humanity, in this surprising coalition with the chancellor. More than 10 percent of the population actively engaged in one way or another in the “welcome culture,” more than fifteen thousand projects and initiatives emerged to help the protection seekers and support the strained administrative structures (Schiffauer, Eilert, and Rudloff. 2017). Years later, one of my Syrian students at Bard College Berlin told me that after months of suffering and being on the run, chased by police and security forces in every country he passed through, he arrived in my hometown, Rosenheim, in August 2015, and could not believe his ears when a German policeman actually told him upon registration, “Welcome to Germany!”

Certainly, such words from a German policeman came unexpectedly in a traditionally Catholic-conservative Bavarian border town. But they also need to be seen as part of a development that, in the years before 2015, had led to some fundamental changes in Germany’s approach toward immigration. Since 1998, when the conservative and anti-immigrationist government of Helmut Kohl had given way to a social democratic–green, halfway pro-immigrationist government, a series of reforms have been undertaken, slowly turning Germany into an almost self-acknowledged immigration country. In 2000, a new citizenship law attributed citizenship not only to those of German ancestry, i.e., having German parents, but also to those born in Germany whose parents are non-German legal residents. The dominant attitudes toward non-German immigrants changed from exclusion to

“integration,” from treating them as a temporary phenomenon and wanting to send them home as soon as the immediate reasons for their coming to Germany were not valid anymore (be it labor market needs, a war, or political crisis) to accepting them and trying to meld them into the German populace. In 2005 a new residency and immigration law was introduced that replaced what used to be called the “foreigner’s law,” eased residency, formulated some legal pathways into Germany, and generally improved the status of legally residing foreigners. This development culminated in another reform of citizenship law in 2014 when German citizenship gave up its claim to be exclusive even for non-EU citizens. Since then, children of non-German legal residents who are born and brought up in Germany do not have to opt anymore between German citizenship and the citizenship of their parents once they turn eighteen: dual citizenship has become a legally accepted, although still-contested, reality. At the same time, in those formative years between 1998 and 2014, the numbers of newly arriving, and especially legally arriving, migrants were relatively low, and neither did these meet the needs of the labor market nor did they seem adequate in the face of the migration crisis unfolding in the Global South and around the Mediterranean. Therefore, the large numbers of “illegally” arriving migrants in 2014–15 were received by many even moderately pro-immigrationist Germans with almost a sense of closure. Finally, all these people, whom we had ourselves prepared for and whom we could now “integrate,” arrived, taking our share of responsibility and simultaneously solving our demographic problems.

In hindsight, the enthusiastic state of mind of the German “welcome culture” in 2015 does seem naïve, but it was not a dream or an illusion. Even the usually staunch right-wing and xenophobic yellow press newspapers, like *Bild* and *BZ*, participated in it, publishing an edition in Arabic and titling it “BILD is welcoming refugees!”¹ Since then, in less than four years, the public mood has shifted to the extreme opposite, again headed by *Bild*, now not missing one day to agitate against refugees with the most appalling xenophobic and Islamophobic stereotypes. And nevertheless, many of the initiatives and volunteer efforts that sprang up in 2015 have been continuing their work. Up to this day, most villages and small towns in West Germany, but also some in the East, have a so-called “helpers circle” (*Helferkreis*) or other such associations that take care of the local refugees and try to protect them against obstructionist politics.²

The ambivalent situation today can be described in simple and general terms of political backlash and reaction and put into the context of a massive global shift toward right-wing populism. But there are also German peculiarities to it. In the following sections, I want to show some of the historical strands of development, reaching far back into the twentieth and nineteenth centuries, that have converged and helped create the present ambivalent attitudes. They can be called specifically German inasmuch as

they are connected to German nation building, German statehood, and the German public sphere, but of course the problems that they responded to always had a global dimension, appeared in other countries too, and cannot be understood without inter- and transnational analysis and contextualization.³ I want to inquire about the specifically German understandings of what a refugee (*Flüchtling*) is, what a migrant is, and how these topoi evolved historically and are still evolving today, in certain discourses, in relation to the German nation-state.

The “German Refugee” up until 1945 and Beyond

Since the French Revolution, concepts of the refugee have always been connected to concepts of what it means to be German. Up until the Nazis' seizure of power in 1933, and again since 1945, German nation building and German state building formed on the concept of Germany being a nation of ancestry (*Abstammungsnation*) with uncertain external and internal borders and a decentralized, federalist state organization. The German people were, in the again untranslatable word *Volk*, imagined “in their tribes” (*Abstammung* means literally “from the tribe”). This tribal thinking was then cast into state citizenship laws that up to 1913—more than forty years after Germany's unification—made someone a German citizen only through holding citizenship of one of the German countries (*Länder*). That created a couple of conceptual contradictions, especially in relation to the Jews (Schneider 2017). French, Polish, Danish, and other origins tended to be ignored. Ancestry was ethnized and essentialized. Immigration officially did not exist, and non-German refugees did not have any positive rights and could face deportation at any time (Heizmann 2012: 48–82).

A refugee, in the sense of someone having a legitimate claim to be given protection and to settle down permanently, used to be first and foremost a *German* refugee—a German who, as part of the German colonization movements to the Eastern empires, had lived in German communities outside of Germany sometimes for centuries and was forced to go “back” because of other nation-states' ethnic-cultural homogenization projects or revolutions; or a German who suddenly found themselves outside of Germany because of shifting borders. These refugees were made to be “German” in a political sense, by the fact that they were given safety, civic belonging, and often material compensations for their losses. After World War I, when Germany lost parts of Prussia and its colonies, Germans were included in larger numbers in the demographic engineering projects of drawing new borders and exchanging populations (Gatrell and Zhvanko 2017).

This experience, of Germans being displaced or becoming refugees, became a widely shared mass experience at the end of and after World War II,

when more than twelve million Germans were expelled from the formerly German regions in the East and from countries that had German minorities and sought to dispel them, also because of their support for the Nazi occupation during the war. In addition, the Soviet occupation of the eastern part of what was left of Germany, and the subsequent partition of Germany into two countries, produced another three to four million refugees fleeing from Soviet and communist rule to West Germany (Beer 2011).

Those numbers, on the backdrop of wartime destruction, misery, and the refusal to face questions of guilt and responsibility, made it hard to acknowledge the suffering of the up to eleven million non-Germans, mostly victims of Nazi Germany, who found themselves on German territory at the end of the war—concentration camp survivors, former forced laborers, and prisoners-of-war, who did not want to go home or had nowhere to go, and new non-German refugees from the East. They were categorized as “displaced persons” by the UN and as “homeless foreigners” by the German authorities, to be repatriated or resettled, and fell under the jurisdiction and care of the Occupation Forces and the United Nations while the German local communities had to pay for their accommodations.

Recent historiographies of forced migration have successfully and meritoriously managed to integrate all the mass movements in the aftermath of World War II into one story, on a European or even on a global scale (Gatrell 2013; Ahonen et al. 2008). But the emerging international order after World War II sharply distinguished between German and non-German forced migrants. Since the end of the war, the United Nations and the Geneva Refugee Convention 1950/51 denied the German expellees and refugees the status of refugee. The UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and the UNHCR (since 1951) were not organizations intended to support displaced members of the nations that had started and lost the war. On the other hand, the United States especially took a strong interest in getting Germany back on its feet and insisted on the German state’s continuing existence. In the frame of the international nation-state system, there was a widely agreed division of labor that the nation-states that had caused the war should take care of their “own” displaced population, and be made able to do so, while the UN would take care of the members of the nation-states that had been victims and those who had become stateless altogether.

The two competing German states founded in 1949 did not protest against this international arrangement and accepted responsibility for the German expellees and refugees, bowing to the occupation powers but also functioning in accordance with the old ethnic-cultural concept of the *Volk*. The West German constitution considered all Germans—German by culture and language—living outside German territory as *Volksdeutsche* who automatically became members of the nation-state once they entered German

territory.⁴ Also, both German states, in spite of not talking to each other, clung to a common German citizenship, constitutionally treating each other's inhabitants not as foreigners but as citizens. Only in 1968 did the GDR depart from this principle and establish a GDR citizenship, consequently aggravating its legitimacy problems as a German state. The Federal Republic, bound by its Constitutional Court to a common citizenship, never gave up the constitutional claim for reunification. And only in 1990, when that was the price to be paid to achieve reunification, did it let go of its right under international law for a Germany within the borders of 1937—i.e., the restitution of the Eastern territories lost to Poland and Russia in 1945.

This irredentism, mitigated by the overwhelmingly accepted obligation never to go to war again, no matter the national grievances, deeply affected Germany's attitudes toward non-German refugees. Too busy with their "German question" and having to integrate all the Germans, the governments and the majority society were unable to feel responsibility for non-Germans, including those whose displacement had been caused by Germany in the first place.

The Constitutional Right for Asylum

Therefore, it seems ever more astonishing how the right for asylum, as an objective, individual right for non-Germans, could enter the German Constitution in 1948/49. In international law, the right of asylum was traditionally the right of a state to grant asylum to a political refugee, even if other states object to it. In national law, not many nation-states have a right *for* asylum, a civic right, a right to be claimed by an individual.⁵ But the meeting of the constitutionalists and legal scholars in Herrenchiemsee in 1948 to draft a provisional constitution for West Germany was a historically unique moment: it was also the time of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and the German constitutionalists wanted to live up to it, also for the sake of Germany gaining back sovereignty and eventually being accepted into the United Nations.⁶ The constitution's section of civil and human rights read like a model student's work on the *Universal Declaration*, and Article 16 was its masterpiece: "Politically persecuted get Asylum," a statement that stood until 1993 with no limitations. While the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is not legally binding, the German constitution transposed the human right for asylum into constitutional law, anticipating legislations at the national level of the member states of the UN that the Geneva Refugee Convention in 1950/51 could and should have initiated but did not, because in the 1950s that special moment had already passed.

The progressiveness of the constitutional right for asylum should not deceive us to overestimate the transnationalist and humanitarian motives of

its inventors. For sure, they wanted to learn from the past, but their lessons differed from those that were projected onto them later. Pro-Western but conservative Hermann von Mangoldt had up until 1945 agreed with the National Socialist, racist, and antisemitic Nuremberg Laws.⁷ An ethnically, culturally, and probably also racially homogeneous German nation-state was what they most certainly all still believed in. Taking in large numbers of “foreigners”—no matter how severely these were persecuted and threatened—would have gone completely against the grain. The right for asylum that they had in mind would not have helped the Jews or any other group that had been persecuted by the Nazis. It was meant for politicians and people like themselves: to enable the political and administrative elites in the emerging international order of nation-states to engage politically and democratically and to take risks for their political convictions, with a pathway out, into the safety of another country, if things turned wrong, the way things had turned wrong in Germany after 1933. The principle of “Politically persecuted get Asylum” was conceived as an individual right, not as a right for large groups, for the sake of the functioning of democracies and was and is also practiced as one, with recognition rates below 2 percent up until today (Poutrus 2019).

The right for asylum remains, though, in spite of these limitations, of fundamental importance for the whole constitutional structure. It opens German statehood to non-Germans, giving non-Germans and non-residents an unalienable right, which is a rare thing in the closed world of nation-states. And it secures a procedural security for the applicants toward the police, the administrations, and courts, which not only works in favor of the 1 to 2 percent of the applicants whose entitlement for asylum according to Article 16 of the constitution is recognized but also helps all those who then obtain refugee status according to the Geneva Convention or other statuses of protection, or even only a short-term permit or a suspension of deportation. Furthermore, the general appreciation and respect for the constitution among the German public and politics eventually rubbed off on the general perception of refugee rights, by the widespread misidentification of the constitutional right for asylum with the rights for refugees granted by the Geneva Convention.

The “Integration” of German Expellees and Refugees after World War II

The fifteen million German expellees were excluded from the Geneva Convention and also exempt from going through the German asylum procedures. They were, according to Article 116.1 of the constitution, *Volks-Germans* who received German citizenship once they entered German ter-

ritory or, if coming from the GDR, already had German citizenship. Exclusion on the international level resulted in a privileged status on the national level, even though, in social reality, the expellees still experienced manifold discriminations and xenophobia (Holler 1993; Beer 2011: 99–126).

Legal “refugees,” on the other hand, were those who came from the GDR to the territory of the Federal Republic after the founding of the two states, sometimes in the dead of night over the inner-German border, sometimes via Berlin, the loophole until the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. A specific procedure, the so-called emergency admission procedure, determined who a refugee was and restricted their freedom of movement if they wanted to be registered for social benefits. A separate “Refugee Permit C” was intended for those who were recognized as political refugees in the strict sense (Limbach 2011).

Despite difficulties, the displaced Germans, whether refugees or expellees, eventually were able to successfully integrate over the years and decades after the war due to the massive state support programs, the interlocking of the national discourse of solidarity with the anticommunist discourse against the Soviet Union and the GDR, and the favorable conditions of West Germany’s so-called economic miracle. Frequent intermarriages over generations ensured that the minority status of the expellees and refugees eventually faded out. Today, probably around half of all Germans have a “migration background” of some sort, as many have parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents who migrated or fled from somewhere.⁸ And even though the expellees served as a conservative factor in German politics, allowing political powers to foster nationalism and revanchism, the individual and family experiences often told another story, one about the cruelty of the disruption of the old multiethnic and multicultural societies. Research has shown that the expellees in general cultivated rather unpolitical memories of their *Heimat* in order to deal with the trauma (Demshuk 2012). The revanchist and nationalist impact of this group primarily manifested in their special interest organization, the Bund der Vertriebenen (League of the expellees), and the position it claimed in German politics to grant compensations and privileges.

The “Refugee” and Human Rights

With the shift of power and discourse through the generational change in the 1960s, specifically the 1968 protest and student movement, a new understanding of the “refugee” was established that lost its anticommunist thrust and eventually adopted more of a humanitarian, human rights, and anti-dictatorship argument. The refugees from Chile arriving in West Germany after the 1973 coup, though not in large numbers, were the first non-German

refugees who profited from this new paradigm (Poutrus 2019: 65–70; Dufner 2013). Interestingly, the shift toward human rights then also affected the perception and the strategies of the East Germans who sought to overcome the wall and leave the GDR. In their struggle for legal exit possibilities, they invoked human rights obligations to obtain their national right, as Germans, to resettle in West Germany, according to the West German constitution (Wolff 2019: 651–719). This occurred at a time when public opinion and politics were almost at a point of recognizing the GDR citizenship law, and only a ruling of the constitutional court prevented the national framework of the “German refugee” from breaking off altogether.

Even more paradoxically, in the 1980s the constitutional provisions that considered the refugee or migrant from the GDR a “German” who enjoyed all rights that West Germans had turned into a vehicle that also made it easier for non-German refugees and migrants to enter the territory of the Federal Republic. As long as the GDR government did not object, it was relatively easy to smuggle someone who would otherwise have needed a visa across the Berlin Wall through the GDR’s inspection points. It is one of the ironies of the history of the Berlin Wall that it became a loophole for extra-European migration into Germany when mass migration from the Global South gained momentum due to the decline of the Soviet Empire and the rise of neoliberalism (Göktürk, Gramling, and Kaes 2007: 69).

The “Guest Worker” and “Asylant”

While the emergency humanitarian situation of non-German refugees became increasingly accepted, work migration for a permanent stay remained in place without systematic legal provisions and was excluded from the nation-state’s conception until the year 2000. In the style of the nineteenth century, industry’s and agriculture’s need for labor was supposed to be covered by temporary workers, ideally through formal agreements with the laborers’ countries of origin. Although permanent residency and naturalization after fifteen years were possible on an individual basis, the decision was left entirely up to local German authorities and the governments.

Large parts of certain sectors of the German economy have always depended on illegal, irregular migrants. Regular temporary labor migration was often by no means more human. An extreme case, based on exclusion and racialization, had been the forced labor under National Socialist rule, where so-called “alien workers” were mostly forcibly transported to Germany and there completely disenfranchised and virtually enslaved, all in accordance with National Socialist laws.⁹ The Federal Republic of Germany obviously had to mark the discontinuity with the Nazi past when in 1955, and in the following decade, it made recruitment agreements first with Italy

and then with Spain, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, Yugoslavia, and others. The foreign laborers had social rights that were more or less equal to those of their German fellow workers, and they were called "guest workers," a term that both trivialized their position and emphasized their supposedly temporary stay (Herbert 1990; Göktürk et al. 2007: 21–64). For the Europeans, the bilateral agreements were, in the course of European integration, replaced by the multilateral agreements and the supranational framework of the Treaty of Rome and following regulations. Within the EEC and since 1993 the European Union, the fundamental right of free movement effectively channeled cheap labor from the South to the economies of Northwest Europe, with Germany profiting most from it (Comte 2018). For the extra-European workers, European integration led to a two-class system that not only underprivileged them and denied them the political rights that were eventually granted to Europeans but also created a hypervisibility for them as "migrants." The public understanding of what constitutes a migrant attached itself especially to the Turkish and then to the Muslim migrant, racially and culturally fixed as the "Other."¹⁰ While in 2016 only 6 percent of the population had a Muslim background, the population estimated their share at 20 percent, a misperception that reveals more than anything else the structural failures of German politics and society to come to terms with the fact that Germany is an immigration country.¹¹

Europeanization and internationalization also had paradoxical effects on the development of the institutions and perceptions of the non-German refugees. Due to the exemption of Germans from the refugee provisions defined by the United Nations and the exceptionality and alleged generosity of the right of asylum in the German constitution, until 2005 there was not much public or political awareness of the international system designed to protect refugees under the Geneva convention. Topics of asylum were often discussed as if Germany did not have to respect international obligations, also due to the lack of presence of the UNHCR in Germany and to the decision-making residing in the hands of a national authority. In the absence of work immigration provisions following the 1973 decision of the federal government under Willy Brandt to stop the "guest worker" programs altogether, the right for asylum became the only legal entrance for foreigners into the German job market and social security systems. But the separation between work migration and flight/displacement is not as clear in practice as it is in theory: persecuted groups impoverish more easily and then also have economic reasons to leave their country, while, conversely, poor people are more often victimized politically. The growing numbers of persons seeking protection, security, and livelihood since the 1980s did not often have much in common with the "political refugee" projected in the constitution. Since the 1980s, in the confusion of terminologies and categories, a "refugee" in everyday language has become a stigmatized figure, also called an "asylant,"

someone asking for protection while really “just” looking for a better life and allegedly straining, or even threatening, state and society, no matter their real status.

Exclusion and “Integration”

After reunification, the economies in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world collapsed, and the Yugoslav wars and other conflicts produced mass-migration movements on an unprecedented scale. While the consolidation of the democratic German nation-state meant that the “German refugee” became altogether extinct, Germany developed into one of the main destination countries for both political and economic migration, both within and outside Europe. This would have been a good time to reconceptualize Germany as a country of immigration and to look for fair and adequate European solutions—for example, working with quotas. But instead of seizing the moment, the German government under Chancellor Helmut Kohl took the congested and overstrained asylum procedures as an opportunity to reinscribe the racialized fears of the foreign “Other” into a nation that bases itself on ancestry. As a consequence, massive racist attacks in the 1990s cost the lives of dozens of innocent people.¹² The government created procedures at airports that made coming to Germany by plane without a visa granted by a German embassy virtually impossible. Then it introduced the concept of safe third countries, hoping that Germany’s geographical position would prevent protection seekers from reaching German territory on the ground. The Dublin Regulation established a fragile and, for the protection of refugees or a fair burden-sharing in Europe, totally inadequate system. To do all of this, the German constitution had to be amended; in 1993, the Right for Asylum in the constitution was mutilated, with the help of the Social Democrats, without the government keeping its promise to introduce an immigration law in turn. The progressing European integration was accompanied by the expansion of “Fortress Europe.” Since 2001, the fight against migration, the fight against smuggling, and the fight against terrorism have more or less merged into a single fight. The protection of the European borders is being increasingly exterritorialized: deserts and seas have turned into mass graves.

While the numbers of asylum applicants indeed fell drastically in the year 2000, and even while they have increased again since 2011, the moral and political implications of these policies were practically absent from public discourse. Only one left-wing newspaper, the *Taz*, regularly published reports on the desperate situation at the European borders in Italy and in Greece. The public knew that people were dying but didn’t really take no-

tice. Since the change of government in 1998 and the Greens' accession in power, however, Germany finally made major steps to recognize itself as an immigration country. A new citizenship law in 2000 fundamentally changed the understanding of what it means to be German. With the introduction of elements of citizenship by birthplace (*jus soli*), it became possible to be born as a German to non-German parents. Finally, in 2005, after long and tedious struggles, an immigration law was put into place that, despite bearing in its name that its purpose was to control and curb rather than to open up and enable, acknowledged for the first time that immigration is a reality.¹³

Again 2015: The "Refugee" as a Challenge and the Topos of the State's "Loss of Control"

By the end of 2014, when the so-called "refugee crisis" set in, considerable parts of the German society were ready to show solidarity. Sports centers had to be closed to the public in order to serve as shelters for a large number of asylum seekers, and hardly anyone complained; on the contrary, families from the neighborhood lined up to donate clothes, offer help, and deliver home-baked cakes. In September 2015, thousands of Syrians, stranded and stuck in the Budapest area following Hungary's announcement that it would no longer register protection seekers, started walking toward Austria on the motorway with the aim of reaching Germany. In response, Chancellor Angela Merkel made use of the "sovereignty clause" in the Dublin Regulation and temporarily took them, all while having to coordinate with the Hungarian and the Austrian governments and other members of her own government, along with German authorities, through extremely difficult communications. Her actions throughout this situation displayed tremendous symbolic power.¹⁴ In almost all villages and towns, "helpers circles" volunteered. Local administrations worked around the clock. Many were up to the challenge, some failed, and some became openly cynical. A countless number of Germans took "refugees" into their homes.

In those months, many Germans who volunteered and engaged in pro-refugee activism developed an awareness of the term *Flüchtling* being problematic in itself. They preferred to call them "newcomers," "forced migrants," or *Geflüchtete*, which is a participle construction like "refugee," arguing that the ending "-ling" in *Flüchtling* could be interpreted as belittling and condescending. The wording and the choice of language became one of the manifestations of the divide between a persistent pro-immigration and pro-asylum minority and a majority that was only supportive in the "summer of welcome" or indifferent, reluctant, hostile from the beginning. The ambiguous semantics of the word, tainted by the multilayered interpre-

tations of the “German” and the “foreign refugee” and the racist traditions connected to them, compromised even the most benevolent references, while it was almost impossible to find a language that completely satisfied the need for accuracy and justice.

Meanwhile, members of the government itself employed images and forms of speech when talking about “refugees” that pulled the rug out from under Angela Merkel’s proclaimed culture of welcome. Her minister of finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, warned in November 2015 that the movement of refugees might escalate into an “avalanche”: “An avalanche can be set off, if just any a little bit imprudent skier enters a slope and moves a little bit of snow.”¹⁵ Here Schäuble insinuates that Merkel’s policies are careless, and he dehumanizes “refugees” with one of the many weather metaphors that were used to incite fear and create the impression of a loss of control.

Apparently taking fright at their own courage, the originally pro-refugee public tide turned first against the “welcome culture” and then against the refugees themselves. The infamous “Kölner Sylvesternacht”—New Year’s Eve 2015/16 in Cologne, where the police could not prevent a large number of sexual assaults by men who were collectively and inaccurately perceived as refugees—became a turning point. German politicians from all parties, even the Greens, suddenly deemed it necessary to show consideration and understanding for the “worries” of the white German majority, whereas political support for the refugees and the “refugee helpers” steadily declined. The civil society initiatives that still to this day, in almost every village and town, take care of the real challenges of getting the newcomers into apartments, schools, trainings, German courses, social services, and, eventually, jobs found themselves increasingly frustrated and overburdened, in unfavorable environments.

In the face of all the difficulties, homegrown or imported, the “refugee” was given again a new shade of meaning: one who is granted rights, initially receives help and goodwill, but then proves to be disappointing, “ungrateful,” unwilling to integrate, and finally deserving of people turning their backs to them. Those Germans who actively participated in the civil society initiatives and entered relationships with real persons could deal with intercultural challenges more or less successfully in a nonideological way, using psychological, cultural, and/or political interpretations depending on their beliefs and experiences. But the media discourse, following its own dynamics, got bored of integration stories quickly and struggled—is still struggling—to address the many questions posed by Germany’s new identity as a country of immigration. The large majority of Germans adopted the role of a bystander, watching warily how Merkel’s “experiment” of “opening the doors” unfolded and how the *Gutmenschen*, the allegedly unrealistic Left-Greens and idealists, toiled for it. The atmosphere of distrust and resent-

ment unleashed in xenophobic outbursts whenever something happened, every failure, every crime, and also every made-up scandal was put into the “refugee’s” account.

And it was not only the ever-rising extremist right-wing party AfD, the yellow press, the populists, and conspiracist social media who fed this dynamic. Liberal conservative voices, social democratic voices, left wing, right wing, moderates and centrists, intellectuals and academics, serious and respected people started to share narratives that made the acceptance and inclusion of refugees seem to be something bad, something that should be avoided, at best a burdensome duty, at worst a stupid mistake, a divisive, unreasonable, or unlawful action, or even a betrayal against the nation. An unholy alliance of conservative law experts, journalists, and politicians spread the theory of the “breach of law” allegedly committed by Merkel when she opened the borders, allowing “illegal entrance” and thereby hurting the nation-state’s sovereignty and integrity (Steinbeis and Detjen 2019). Even though this theory was rebuked by an overwhelming majority of constitutional law professors, the notion of Merkel having done something wrongful and stupid stuck with the public. Another even more successful theory was the one of “loss of control”: if letting the “refugees” in could not be considered illegal, it was seen as a fundamental weakness, a blackout, a collapse of the state and the rule of law and order, a moment of chaos and extreme danger.¹⁶

Over weeks and months, Merkel stubbornly insisted that her policy had been right. But as all attempts to reform the Dublin system and to reach a redistribution mechanism within the European Union failed, and pressure domestically and externally increased, she resorted to a measure that she herself must have felt to be a “pact with the devil.”¹⁷ Under Merkel’s leadership, the EU in the winter of 2015/16 negotiated an agreement with Turkish prime minister and authoritarian ruler Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that, on paper, committed the EU to take in official, registered refugees from Turkey in the same numbers that migrants who had crossed the Mediterranean to Greece and entered the EU “illegally” were sent back to Turkey. Erdoğan promised to block “illegal” migration from Turkey to Europe in return for €6 billion to support provisions for refugees in Turkey, plus visa-free travel for Turkish citizens and accelerated accession talks with the EU. It is still today contested which elements of this agreement worked, and to what result. The number of migrants reaching the EU has indeed dropped drastically—not only because of Turkish efforts but also because Eastern European countries have secured their borders. Turkey, too, closed its borders with Syria. As a consequence, almost four million Syrians in Northwestern Syria, around Idlib, were caught, left without support to face the genocidal actions of Assad and his allies, many of whom had fled or been deported to Idlib

from Assad-occupied Syria before. The principle of nonrefoulement, cornerstone of the Geneva Convention, has since become a sheer hypocrisy. Even the knowledge of the founders of the German constitution, that all political, democratic, civic activity depends on being able to save oneself from persecution, to emigrate, if things turn wrong, and find protection elsewhere, is now willfully being ignored.

Effectively having sealed off Syria, Germany, showing superficial respect to international law while acting in the sole interest of the nation-state, can now on its territory afford to follow through with a migration policy that has three basic goals: rejection and deportation of anyone who is considered “illegal”; economic but also cultural “integration” of those one cannot get rid of without turning “illegal” oneself; and proactive recruitment of workers and professionals who are directly needed for the German economy, preferably in their home countries, in agreement with their governments.¹⁸

Furthermore, the government and state intensively continue to work toward a European migration management system in the countries beyond the EU’s external borders. Such management is intended to take care of the labor market interests of the member states as well as achieve readmission agreements with the unwanted migrants’ countries of origin, to research current migration movements, and to prevent “illegal” migration altogether and house and immobilize migrants in camps (Buckel 2013: 186–225). Meanwhile, sea rescue in the Mediterranean has been dramatically reduced: the naval EU Operation Sophia withdrew altogether, leaving the job to the unwilling coast guards of the mostly undemocratic or failing states like Libya bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Private rescue organizations have stopped working or are pressed to do so under the constant threat of being criminalized as supporting the “smugglers” and being denied access to Italy’s, France’s, or Spain’s harbors. Commitments to resettle UNHCR refugees in Germany are easy to talk about, reluctantly promised, and hardly ever fully met. Additional complementary pathways that would be legally possible and politically feasible remain largely unused.¹⁹

At least rhetorically but probably also subjectively, the German government and all political parties except the AfD remain obliged to the general idea of refugee protection, to a fair share of the burdens, as well as to international law. But effective measures in that direction appear to be impossible. The constant assurances that bringing down the numbers and fighting “illegal” migration is a political priority, the framing of migration in terms of terrorism and crime, the lack of practiced solidarity with other European countries, Islamophobia and the ignorance about own entanglements in colonial history, and, more than anything else, the prerogative of the sovereign nation-state in thinking and practice form an amalgam that obviously prevents a rational and humane approach toward the displaced and forcibly exiled.

The "Refugee" as the Alleged Cause for Growing Right-Wing Extremism

The longer these disputes go on, the more a threatening question comes to the fore: Would it be possible that the hostility against migrants in general and "illegal" migrants specifically might one day lead to the return of fascism to Germany, to a nationalistic, antisemitic, and racist government, a replay even of Nazi rule? These questions loom over the non-white minorities living in Germany; however, they also loom over the white Germans themselves and have a great deal of influence on perceptions and attitudes.

We have to go back a few steps again. The principle of ancestry that still dominates German citizenship, even though in 2000 it was significantly restrained, is ambivalent in itself. On the one hand, it perpetuates the ethnic foundation of the "Germans" as a nation. On the other hand, it negates racism by including everyone who becomes naturalized, and their descendants, irrevocably into that nation. Not every German is expected to be ethnically German, but every nonethnic German is expected to be selected carefully and "integrated" into an ethnically based nation. The Nazis indeed violated this principal of ancestry, without abolishing it altogether. They created a two-class system of citizenship and deprived German Jews and German Sinti and Roma from all their rights, deported them to the occupied eastern territories outside of Germany, disowned them, and murdered them in the Holocaust, where citizenship did not make a difference anymore. But, bureaucratically, the semblance of legal procedures and legal continuity was even maintained in Auschwitz (Neander 2008).

In the decades after the war, both politics and the public in the Federal Republic of Germany eventually learned to acknowledge guilt and responsibility for the National Socialist crimes. The slogan "Never again!" has a broad consensus in the German society. Not even the AfD, not even the right wing of the AfD, propagates a return to National Socialism the way Germany had it under Hitler.²⁰ There is even an argument that the relativizations and trivializations of National Socialism undertaken by some of the AfD politicians have limited the party's attraction for ultraconservative and nationalist Germans, who otherwise agree with them.

But what if it is exactly this "Never again!" in memory culture that paradoxically adds to the German apprehensions against the migrant? National Socialism had antisemitism as its core ideology; antisemitism in turn, at least until 1948 when the state of Israel was founded, had a strong antimigrant current. The phantasmagoria of a handful of Jews secretly ruling the world in the West went along with the phantasmagoria of their countless poor and ragged relatives from the East flooding into the country and eventually replacing the native population. These delusions made any attempt by the "emancipated" German Jews to integrate and assimilate in order to solve

the equally delusional Jewish question futile. The antisemitism controversy between the two liberal historians Theodor Mommsen and Heinrich von Treitschke in 1880 revolved around these questions: while Treitschke conjured up the image of the young, industrious Jewish man coming to Germany to “sell trousers,” who would beget children and grandchildren and would pull others after him “from the inexhaustible cradle” of the East, Mommsen countered that Germany needed the Jewish “cultural ferment” and that the “Jewish question” would eventually be resolved by Christianization, assimilation, and modernization (Treitschke 1879; Mommsen 1880).

In historical reality, indeed, due to the pogroms, the violence, and the destruction in the crumbling empires of the East, especially in the Russian Empire and after World War I in Poland and the Soviet Union, Jewish immigration to Germany constantly added to the already existing Jewish population. The so-called “Eastern Jews” were mostly on their way to the United States, but some of them became stranded in Germany and tried to get asylum and a residency to settle down. Staying in Germany became an option especially since 1924, when the Immigration Act of the United States drastically reduced the possibilities to relocate there. The parallels between the “Eastern Jews” and the “refugees” of our days are striking.²¹ Impoverished, victims of failed revolutions, of violent homogenization processes and “nation building” in the East, often stateless, they had witnessed the darkest side of the modern nation-state paradigm. In the Weimar Republic, the state of Prussia granted asylum to some of them, but only in the form of “toleration,” which could be revoked at any time. The authorities’ efforts to deport them often failed because Poland and the Soviet Union refused to take them back. The rise of antisemitism in Germany in the 1920s was decisively linked to the influx of the Eastern European Jews, who were regarded as altogether foreign, too foreign to be assimilated, giving fuel to the antisemitic idea of an “international Jewry” allegedly undermining the nation-states.²² Even after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, seventy-two thousand Polish Jews were stuck in the German Reich. In the Polenaktion (Poland action), seventeen thousand of them were forcibly deported to Poland in October 1938, among them the parents of Herschel Grynszpan, a seventeen-year-old man who had made it to Paris. In his grief and rage, Grynszpan killed a German diplomat in the German embassy in Paris, an event that was then taken as a pretext in Germany to unleash the so-called Reichspogromnacht on 9 November 1938, destroying more than a thousand synagogues and thousands of shops and businesses, killing more than thirteen hundred people and arresting more than thirty thousand (Benz 2001: 56–58).

The interrelation between antimigrant sentiments and antisemitism in the interwar period and its significance for the rise and the rule of National Socialism has not been reflected sufficiently in historiography and is widely ignored in German memory culture. The German “Never again!” relates

to the Holocaust, the war, and the disenfranchisement and exclusion of the mostly assimilated German Jews from the German citizenry. It does not relate to events like the Poland Action and the deportation of Herschel Grynszpan's parents; it does not relate to the treatment of Jews of the 1920s and 1930s as illegal or unwanted immigrants and refugees; and it does not relate to the German bureaucracies' efforts to legitimize even the Holocaust as "legal migration" on paper and in the eyes of many contemporaries.

This blind spot in German memory culture contributes to a specifically German link that exists between the perception of the foreign refugee and the perception of the threat of growing right-wing extremism. Since World War II, there has been a strong fear among social and cultural elites both in the Federal Republic and in the GDR that the German *Volk* might again freak out and turn Nazi. The *Volk* is seen as the ultimate source of the state's sovereignty, but also as a highly unreliable, potentially dangerous variable. The liberal spectrum specifically imagines that the *Volk*, overwhelmed and overstrained by the impositions of modernity, is potentially disconnected, declassed, predisposed to demagoguery, and prone to envy the profiteers of modernization and globalization. In this frame of thought, the genocidal drive against the Jews and their educated, successful, geographically and socially mobile modern existence finds an explanation as a more general drive against education, success, globalization, and upward social mobility, emanating from the static and left-behind parts of the *Volk*.²³ The nation-state hence is being attributed a double function: mitigating the raging forces of modernity and keeping the *Volk* at bay. The vehicle to do so is the rule of law, and the condition for the state to fulfil this function is that it secures control over the borders and control over the composition of the inhabitants at any time. Only by preventing an uncontrolled influx of new carriers of modern uprootedness, it is possible to properly root-integrate-the newcomers and to reassure and take along the *Volk*.

These "liberal" ideas might at least partly motivate the strange topos of Merkel's alleged "loss of control" that has been dominating the discourse on "illegal" migration and on the so-called opening of the border. (The border was already open, due to the Schengen Agreement; Merkel just did not close it.) In order to keep the *Volk* reassured and to protect the imagined figure of the "integrated Jew"—a figure that one identifies with, feeling slightly uprooted oneself—it is necessary that the nation-state be intact, that state power be unchallenged, that the national population be halfway homogeneous, and that the borders be always under control.²⁴ Hence the curious phenomenon that so many educated and liberal Germans believe in cultural limits of Germany's "absorption capacity," even though they themselves identify as cosmopolites and do not practice a particularly "German culture" in their own lives at all. The benchmark for the "absorption capacity" is not formed by hard economic and social facts—by the labor market, the condition of the

social security systems, the demographic development, and the like. Nor is it formed by cultural standards—will the newcomers play enough Brahms, appreciate asparagus, go to the Christmas market? But it is really formed by a political consideration: will Germany be able to “integrate the newcomers” and make them agreeable for the *Volk* quickly and thoroughly enough as to not give those who are perceived rightly or wrongly as the losers of modernization the chance to rise again and seize power?

The “migrant” and “refugee” is thus very closely tied to the threat of right-wing extremism. Identifying it as one, if not the main, cause for the outbursts of the *Volk*'s discontent with modernization, liberal discourse enters into negotiations with the right-wing discourse about access, control, integration, etc. The questions to be negotiated are mostly not tangible and practical but symbolic: unproductive claims that the immigrants are integrating well or will integrate soon or will not integrate or cannot integrate, equally unproductive demonstrations that the state and government are acting or not acting or cannot act or do not want to act, etc. A spiral of arguments is set in motion that pushes the liberals more and more into the defensive whereas the right-wingers get the lead. They can go on and on, as their demands are impossible to satisfy, as “integration” and “control” will never be completed, as the ambivalences of modernity cannot be solved, and as the worst human instincts in the *Volk* and the elites—greed, hatred, fear—get continuously rewarded instead of reprimanded, turning the supposed *Volk*'s potential Nazi threat into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In 1993, the Social Democrats helped to alter the constitution and strip the right for asylum to bring down the numbers of “refugees,” attempting to take the wind out of the sails of roaring antimigrant and extreme right-wing sentiments. Indeed, the numbers of protection seekers were reduced drastically through these and other measures, and, also, the numbers of antirefugee attacks were reduced. Since 2015, again, asylum laws have been tightened continuously, with SPD participation in government, and the numbers of protection seekers are drastically being reduced. While the numbers of antirefugee attacks also seem to be going down, albeit slowly,²⁵ there is no end in sight to the development of right-wing and xenophobic hate crime. “We’ll hunt them down. We’re going to hunt down Frau Merkel or whoever. ... We will chase the government,” the top AfD candidate Alexander Gauland threatened the liberal establishment in September 2017 after the Bundestag elections, when the AfD became the third strongest party.²⁶ Indeed, even the Greens, originally fervently pro-refugee, have joined in the talk of the “rule of law” that allegedly needs to prove itself by executing deportations.²⁷ The desperate attempts to claim control over the borders and the foreign population, to thereby win back the *Volk* and to stop the rise of the right wing, have made the manifold violations of international law in

Europe's treatment of the "refugee," which are really happening, a negligible, acceptable factor.

The Germans' "refugees" significance for the conditions of ambivalent modern and liberal existence in the nation-state, historically centered so much around sovereignty and homogeneity, will in the future rather increase than decrease.

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Notes

1. "BILD heißt Flüchtlinge willkommen!"
2. A follow-up study by a team of anthropologists under Werner Schiffauer, the chairman of the board of the Council for Migration, which in 2016 had done a mapping of the pro-refugee projects initiated in 2015, confirmed the persistence of the Welcome Culture until 2018. (Schiffauer, Eilert, and Rudolf 2018). Since then, the "helpers circles" frustrations have grown, due to politics; see e.g., "Integration im Alltag" (2019).
3. For the traps of methodological nationalism, see Glick, Schiller, and Wimmer (2003). I follow the theoretical concept of the Migration Regime developed by Frank Wolff and Christoph Rass that allows for scaling the analysis to all levels, from local to global, and my focus on Germany is a result of my questions, not of any kind of presuppositions about a German *Sonderweg*; see Rass and Wolff (2018).
4. See, on the "ethnonational dimension" of the German constitution, Klusmeyer and Papademetriou (2009: 22–29).
5. By 1950, only 11 percent of constitutions contained a right to asylum; see Meili (2018: 392).
6. The Federal Republic of Germany gained sovereignty in several steps between 1949 and 1990, the most significant one taken in 1955, and it only entered the United Nations in 1973 after the end of the Hallstein doctrine.
7. His article on "Racial Law and the Jewry," published in 1939, pointed to the "great dangers" of mixing "own blood" with "alien [artfremden] blood" and to the "drastic measures" that nations have been taking at all times to prevent racial alien infiltration [*Überfremdung*]; this racist discourse is not as opposed to his

- admiration for the US constitutionalism as it appears to his biographers (Rohlf's 1997: 46–48).
8. Navid Kermani, a famous Iranian writer, was the first to draw attention to this fact in a speech delivered to the German Parliament in May 2014, celebrating the sixty-fifth anniversary of the constitution and ending with a memorable “Danke Deutschland!” (Thank you, Germany!); see “Jeder Zweite in Deutschland mit Migrationshintergrund?” (2015).
 9. The interdependency between legal and illegal migration in German history is described by Karakayali (2008).
 10. Foroutan (2013). For the gender implications of this development, see: Clarence (2009).
 11. “Wahrnehmung und Realität” (2016).
 12. For the racializing of the “foreigner,” which not only affected German politics but also German historiography, see Alexopoulou (2018).
 13. The full title of the law is: Gesetz zur Steuerung und Begrenzung der Zuwanderung und zur Regelung des Aufenthalts und der Integration von Unionsbürgern und Ausländern (Act to control and to curb immigration and to regulate the residency and the integration of EU citizens and of foreigners).
 14. Steinbeis and Detjen (2019) offer a detailed reconstruction of the events and controversies around Merkel’s alleged “opening of the borders” and its legal implications.
 15. “Schäuble warnt vor Flüchtlings-‘Lawine’” (2015).
 16. Journalist Robin Alexander’s (2017) number-one bestseller contributed significantly to this notion.
 17. “Ein Pakt mit dem Teufel.”
 18. The double face shows itself in the “migration package,” a series of nine legal acts that have come or are coming into effect between July 2019 and March 2020: on the one hand, the “Experts Immigration Act” takes significant steps toward further enabling immigration for well-educated migrants with knowledge of German and either a job or financial means; on the other hand, the “Orderly Return Act” not only eases deportation, it also forces the migrants to cooperate with authorities of their countries of origin, no matter how evil their governments are. See “Übersicht zum ‘Migrationspaket’” (2019).
 19. The government has promised to resettle 10,200 UNHCR refugees but is using public-private partnerships, in the so-called NesT-program, to get 500 of them financed through private persons, even though many municipalities have expressed their willingness to receive refugees. See “Kommunen als ‘sichere Häfen’?” (2019).
 20. The splinter parties Die Rechte, NPD, and Der III. Weg are openly Nazi. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution estimated the numbers of persons with an openly Nazi orientation at around twenty-five thousand for 2018 (“Verfassungsschutzbericht 2018”: 50).
 21. Already observed by Kailitz (2015).
 22. For the reactions of German-Jewish voices to the 1921 Scheunenviertel Pogrom, see Schneider (2017: 120).
 23. See, as an example, Aly (2011).

24. The exploitation of the "integrated Jews" against the allegedly not integrable Muslims was one of the reasons why the young Jewish author Max Czollek wrote an angry polemic in 2018, raging against the German "integration theater" and "memory theater," where the Jews as "good victims" help to stabilize the Germans, and asking the Jews, the migrants, and whoever else to "desintegrate!" Czollek (2018).
25. "Straftaten gegen Asylunterkünfte nach Deliktbereichen 2014–2018" (n.d.); "Chronik flüchtlingsfeindlicher Vorfälle" (2020).
26. "Wir werden Frau Merkel jagen" (2017).
27. "Wie die Grünen ihren Ton verschärfen" (2018).

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