

A country under siege? Germany and the migration issue in the long 1990s

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This paper examines the history of migration in Germany from the fall of the Berlin wall until the late 90's. The history of German migration throughout the 20th century has been quite different from the history of other European countries. The last decade of the century represents a turning point on the German perspective concerning the immigration issue.

To understand all the events that took place after the reunification, it is essential to make a small summary of the history of the previous years in Germany.

After the end of the second world war Germany was divided into four different occupation zones and “only” in 1949 there was the official declaration of the birth of the two Germanies. First the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) declared its sovereignty and a month later the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) followed the same path. Since the beginning of the division of the country, East Germans found themselves living in worse economic and social conditions compared to West Germans. The citizens of East Germany suffered from a lack of freedom for a long time. In this concern, in the GDR, just like in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, the absence of human rights had led more and more people into a state of discouragement and distrust of public institutions. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of citizens in the GDR fled to the west. The great exodus of young people of working age created a stalemate in the nation's economic progress. As a consequence, it was registered an economical and social decrease of the state in East Germany. However, the turning point was in 1989, after months of protests on 9 November 1989 the Berlin wall officially fell.

East Germans were not the only immigrants in West Germany during the years of the division. In West Germany there were many European economic migrants along with non-European migrants. Most of them, failed to integrate in the society since they were the so called Gastarbeiter (guest workers). Guest workers would live in Germany only for a certain amount of time and in the meanwhile, they sent their remittances back in their own countries to their families. Turkish and Italians were among the most common nationalities.

Going back to the fall of the Berlin Wall, we know that its fall was an unexpected event for many people. The chancellor of West Germany Helmut Kohl himself was really surprised the day it happened. Kohl thought he would have not lived long enough to see the fall of the Berlin Wall. That day he was not even in Germany since he was abroad for an official visit to Poland¹. The history of the German reunification but more in general, German history in the long 90's, was shaped by the actions of Helmut Kohl. After the wall fell Helmut Kohl moved fast and on 28 November, he introduced to the Bundestag a 10-point plan to overcome the division of Germany.

An important step for the unified Germany was to become part of the NATO. On 7 and 8 February 1990 US Secretary of State James Baker during a meeting in Moscow, got permission for Germany to join NATO².

From November 1989 to September 1990, German history was conditioned by planetary summits and bilateral meetings. The signing ceremony of the treaty on the final status of Germany was held

¹ M. Nava, *Storia della Germania dopo il muro* (2020, Rizzoli) p. 159.

² V. Giacché, *Anschluss L'annessione L'unificazione della Germania e il futuro dell'Europa* (2019, Diarkos editore) p. 19.

on 12 September 1990 in Moscow. The treaty is remembered with the formula two plus four, since it was signed by the two Germanies and the four victorious powers of the Second World War. The day chosen for the official reunification of the country was 3 October 1990. The day 3 October represented nothing important for the country since nothing special ever happened on that day. The ceremony of the reunification was held in Berlin, the city symbol of the division that on the 20 June 1991 was declared as the new capital of the country³.

The 3 October Helmut Kohl opened the first seating of the newly unified parliament and on the same day he sent a letter to the heads of state of the world. There was written,

“Today the German nation is united in peace and freedom once again. By regaining national unity, our country intends to serve the cause of world peace and European unity. This is the mandate of our constitution and the moral and legal obligations stemming from German history. We know that we assume a greater responsibility towards the community of nations. We want to complete the single market by 1992 and move towards currency union. German unity will play an active role in the development of European unity”⁴

Through these words it was possible to understand Kohl ideas and goals.

During a summit held on 9 and 10 December 1991, the heads of state and government of the European community signed a treaty to create an economic, monetary and political union. Kohl was a strong supporter of the European currency and to do so he had to go against the Germans desire to keep using the mark. From the 1 January 1999 the Euro became the official national currency in defiance of the Mark, even though the citizens of the Germany could use it to pay until 31 December 2001⁵.

However, before the Euro, Kohl played an active role in unifying the currency of Germany. On 7 February 1990 he had proposed to start a unified currency. In West Germany citizens used the German Mark, instead in East Germany used the East German Mark. The idea of using the German Mark was deeply supported by East Germans who were facing economic difficulties and just a few days later the first banners appeared in the streets saying: “If the Mark comes, we stay, if it does not, we reach it!”. In the end both sides of the country started using the German Mark⁶.

One year after the reunification, production increased by two per cent in the West and fell by twenty per cent in the East. The Government kept saying that the East would soon reach the economic status of the West. In the course of time, Eastern regions lost hundreds of thousands of inhabitants. Almost 2 million between 1991 and 2017. While the prices were being unified, the salaries gap persisted. After the happiness for the reunification, the reality eventually came out. Problems would not fade away in a short time. Reunification demonstrated the differences between East and West. With no border between the two Germanies, there was the possibility to travel, and several millions of Germans moved from the GDR to the West for better-paid jobs. East Berlin was another culture, another way of communicating and even another dialect. East Germans had to choose between poverty and emigration. The months before the fall of the wall were characterised by protests in which citizens shouted, “we are one population”. But the question at that time was “Are we still one population?”⁷.

Reunification coincided with political upheavals in Eastern Europe and the result was a lightening of constraints on migration. Between 1989 and 1993 around 1.4 million ethnic Germans (called

³ *op.cit.*; M.Nava, pp. 66-69.

⁴ *op.cit.*; M.Nava, p. 81.

⁵ M. Gehler, *Le tre Germanie. Germania Est, Germania Ovest e Repubblica di Berlino* (2013, Odoja) pp. 306-308.

⁶ *op.cit.*; M.Nava, pp.154-155.

⁷ *op.cit.*; M.Nava pp.117-123.

Aussiedler) arrived in Germany. In 1998 Helmut Kohl made a speech and welcomed them “home” by saying they were all part of the profit of the German homeland⁸.

Nevertheless, since 1990 those people had faced more and more restrictions in entering the country. In 1992 the government did not allow to enter to more than 220.000 people each year, and in the following year the number was reduced at 110.000. Even though those citizens had the right to receive the German citizenship. In the following years the authorities decided that the right would be given only to those born before 1993.⁹

In that time, there was the relaunch of the question of German identity, which raised doubts concerning the compatibility between Wessis (West Germans) and Osis (East Germans), and above all concerning the actual belonging of the Aussiedler to the German national community.

The topic of migration had been touched by Helmut Kohl since its first election in 1982, when he said that Germany was not and would have not become an immigration country. The following years, however, proved him wrong¹⁰.

Reunification posed a challenge because it also coincided with the arrival of large numbers of non-German migrants. The number of asylum seekers in Germany increased from 35.000 in 1984 to 256.000 in 1991. In the following year, the total reached 438.000.

A foreigners' Law in 1990 gave Turkish workers and other foreigners the right to apply for a permanent residency permit after 8 years of living in the country, and two years later to ask for naturalisation. Those who were born in Germany to Turkish parents were not allowed to claim dual citizenship but by the age of 18 had to choose one nationality. The public opinion on migration was not positive. According to the national German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, in 1992 around 3 quarters of adult Germans thought that foreigners were abusing their social system. Germans living in the former GDR tended to be less acceptive of foreigners. Refugees in particular faced difficulties in being accepted. The manifestation of this xenophobic atmosphere caused a succession of murders in the early 1990s motivated by racism. In August 1992, a group far right people attacked the Central Refugee Shelter in the city of Rostock housing mainly Roma migrants. Another notorious attack happened in 1993. Skinheads committed arson setting a house on fire in the city of Solingen. A large Turkish family lived there and 5 of them died (3 of them were underage). Citizens complained that when the police were called, they always arrived late and liberal Germans blamed East Germans for the attacks. The German president of the time, Richard Von Weizsäcker, invited his fellow Germans to think of the victims. However, his intervention did not bring any change to the growth of right-wing nationalism in the later 1990's. Minority Turkish Germans leaders used to say; “the Wall fell on us”, by which they meant that the competition in the labour market from unemployed East Germans as well as the more intense xenophobia had increased. “Ich bin Berliner” were the words of young Turks in occasion of the manifestations against work discrimination and racism. These words recalled the famous speech of Kennedy at the time of the Berlin wall.¹¹

More than 1 million applications for asylum were presented to Germany between 1990 and 1993. Although most applications failed, some asylum seekers were allowed to remain. Because of the increasing requests of asylum in 1993, in order to stop them, there was the decision from the government to implement a new act. The Welfare act for asylum seekers. Two main changes were

⁸ P. Gatrell, *The Unsettling of Europe. How migration reshaped a continent* (2019, Basic books editore) p.286

⁹ S.Paoli, *Frontiera sud. L'Italia e la nascita dell'Europa di Schengen*, (2018, Mondadori) p. 189.

¹⁰ *op.cit.*; S.Paoli, p. 85.

¹¹ *op.cit.*; pp. 292-296.

introduced; first the person who reached Germany to ask for asylum could be returned to a country that had passed before reaching German territory. Secondly, a new procedure would allow authorities to reject demands for asylum if they thought the countries of the asylum seekers were not actually persecuting their citizens. This law caused a decline in applications but on the other hand an increase of undocumented people.

After these racist and xenophobic attacks, protests began in the country. Germans and Turks protested together to the chorus of "Never again in Germany". The desire for redemption and the will of not being associated with the country's Nazi past was a shared feeling among young Germans.

Towards the end of the 90's the levels of unemployment were very high and after 16 years of power, Helmut Kohl was no longer able to understand the needs of the German citizens. In 1998 Gerard Schröder was elected as the new chancellor of Germany. That event signed the end of Kohl's leadership, an era characterised by the social and economic reunification of the country. Schröder, on his side, was waiting, ready to bring Germany towards the new millennium¹².

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¹² *op.cit.*; M.Nava, pp.186-187.