

Integration and Ethnic Similarities

In order to understand how specific groups of immigrants and refugees are affected differently by the consolidation of integration policies in contemporary Germany, we need to return to the early policies of the postwar German state – decades before the start of the guest worker policies that are frequently marked in public discourse as the moment at which mass migration began. White subjects marked in some way as “German” have consistently been privileged in integration politics. Being marked as both “white” and “German” permitted various groups – from Eastern European expellees after 1945 to so-called late settlers from the collapsing Soviet Union nearly 50 years later – to gain access to German political and public spaces without being compelled to conform to the rhetoric of integration.

During the postwar chaos in Europe after 1945, millions of people were crossing the continent, many of them on foot. Two world wars had been fought to defend a variety of nationalist principles, and ethnic belonging still served as the foundation for national belonging. After the war, West Germans rebuilt their society as an exemplary social democracy, with one of the strongest economies in Europe. West Germans forged a new national identity founded on a sense of guilt for the destruction waged by the Nazi dictatorship and were committed to making their country both a democracy and a refuge for displaced peoples and the persecuted. The West German Basic Law (the placeholding document created in the context of the East-West division in 1949 that serves to this day as Germany’s Constitution) included asylum as a basic right. Both Germans and international politicians largely understood this move to be a way to atone for imperial expansion and genocide under Nazi rule.

West German attitudes towards newcomers directly after the war and into the 1960s coalesced around two groups of people who played

One Word Shapes

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