



GERMANY IN THE 21ST CENTURY PART III: WHO IS A GERMAN?

By David Danelo



David J. Danelo is director of field research at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. A U.S. Naval Academy graduate, he served seven years as a Marine Corps infantry officer, including a 2004 Iraq deployment as a convoy commander, intelligence officer and provisional executive officer. His initial freelance assignments came in 2005, when he reported on U.S. military strategy from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti, from the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, and postwar observations from Vietnam. His first book, Blood Stripes: The Grunt's View of the War in Iraq, was awarded a 2006 Silver Medal, and Gen. James Mattis listed the book among mandatory reading for Marines deploying to combat. His second book, The Border, earned a spot on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection commissioner's reading list. His most recent book is The Return: A Field Manual for Life After Combat. In June 2011, Danelo was appointed to direct policy and planning within the Department of Homeland Security. While serving in government, he stabilized and led a policy and planning team, helped create the U.S. Border Patrol's four year strategic plan, and developed U.S. Customs and Border Protection's first-ever integrated planning guidance. He returned to the private sector in August 2012.

If Americans were asked to identify a city that most epitomizes Germany's defining 21st century dilemma, few would instinctively pick the town of Tröglitz. Before March 2015, the Saxony-Anhalt village south of Leipzig was best known, if at all, as a nice place for workers from the nearby Zeitz Chemical and Industrial Park to live. Farms and forests encircle the city center, and streets named after Friedrich Bergius and Max Planck remind visitors of the scientific forefathers whose discoveries in chemistry and physics paved the way for their employment. But roads honoring Karl Marx and Ernst Thälmann commemorate the immediate political past; twenty five years ago, Tröglitz was in East Germany, and the city's 3,000 inhabitants have not forgotten the obstacles they faced on their path to reintegrate with the west.



It is a different type of chemistry that has made Tröglitz well known throughout Germany: the combustible mix that migration adds to a culture that, while overtly welcoming, fears threats to economic stability, physical security, and personal comfort. In December 2014, after announcing his city's intention to house 40 Syrian amnesty seekers for shelter in a vacant city building, Tröglitz mayor Markus Nierth suddenly, and unexpectedly, became the epicenter of Germany's immigration debate. In an ad hoc coalition, neo-Nazi and anti-immigration groups traveled from throughout Germany to oppose the shelter, claiming to speak for a silent majority. Three months later, Nierth, who was both praised and vilified in town hall meetings, resigned as mayor; he wanted to protect his wife and seven children from hate speech. Nierth became the first German politician to resign under neo-Nazi pressure since the Adolf Hitler era.

Since Nierth's resignation, Tröglitz has become an ideological battleground. The city represents the front lines for a government committed to promoting integration, and a line in the sand for far-right activists. "It is a difficult topic," says Katrin, an innkeeper and longtime Tröglitz resident in her mid-40s. "The social and economic policies should be better regulated." Katrin sympathizes with the asylum seekers, but also fears how "the natives" will react to their arrival. She says most Tröglitz residents believe Germany's economic policies will end up benefitting those granted asylum, and leave "good hard working Germans" disenfranchised.

Throughout Germany, Tröglitz has come to symbolize the national discussion about migration's economic, political, and cultural impact. In 2014, Germany welcomed 200,000 asylum seekers—more than any country worldwide, and more than the next two European countries (Sweden and Italy) combined. Last year, Germany became home to one in every five asylum seekers in the world. German migration officials estimate they will have settled 300,000 in Deutschland when this year ends, the highest number since reunification.

What has made Germany the continent's prime migrant destination? Liberal asylum laws? Lingering guilt for the continental refugee crisis following both world wars? A relative absence of a colonial legacy? Prospective economic opportunity? Or the evolving experience West and East Germans have with integrating a generation of Turkish migrant workers?

Over twenty-five years of slow, deliberate reunification, some combination of all these variables have shaped Germany's migration policies. Second only to Sweden, Germany's asylum and refugee laws are the most liberal in Europe. "If the asylum application is accepted, persons granted asylum status and those granted refugee status receive a temporary residence permit and are given the same status as Germans within the social insurance system," reads text from Germany's official Migration and Integration web page. "They are entitled to social welfare, child benefits, child-raising benefits, integration allowances and language courses as well as other forms of integration assistance."

The *Willkommenskultur*, or welcoming culture, was part of a path to excising both postwar guilt and post-Cold War memories. Excepting Sweden—a country with a long history of sheltering political refugees, including from World War II-era Germany—the commitment to asylum seekers, enshrined in Germany's 1949 postwar constitution, contrasts with the rest of Europe. In 2014, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy combined to shelter about the same number of migrants as Germany alone. Most German families have grandparents who were war refugees themselves, and many former East Germans remember fleeing to the West. By entitling refugees to the same social benefits of citizens, Germans affirm solidarity with the migrant's plight, and pay a type of psychological reparation to those who the Nazis displaced.

Germany also differs from Europe in its absence of any recent colonial history with most migrants or asylum seekers. In many European countries—consider the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Spain—a colonial background may provide a shared language for migrants, but also brings stereotypes of racial inferiority, creating obstacles to social integration. Although Germany claimed territories in Africa (and portions of New Guinea), and hosted the infamous 1884 Berlin conference that divided ownership of the continent among European powers, few asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants seek Germany as a post-colonial destination. This impacts internal European attitudes as well; three of every four temporary workers in Germany, including asylum seekers, are European. "Italy is awful," said Marta, an Italian who visited Berlin as a law student in 2011, and has kept a food service job for three years so she could stay in Germany. "The quality of life here is so much better."

Unlike post-colonial migrants, refugees are not drawn to Germany because of a common language. They arrive believing, not without cause, that Germany offers the best chance for them to build a better, safer, more prosperous life. As commentators hyperventilate over Germany's austere economic leadership—headlines like "Blame Germany if Europe Implodes"; "It's Time to Kick Germany Out of the Eurozone"; and "Greece Should Not Give In to Germany's Bullying" dominate U.S. foreign policy websites—migrants pour into the country seeking the Deutschland Dream. In 2013, according to UNHCR data,

Germany processed more asylum applications than any other country. The United States—a country where 15 percent of the population claims German ancestry—was second.

Germany's current economic strength was, in part, built by a generation of Turkish immigrants. In October 1961, Germany established conditions for welcoming 280,000 Turkish guest workers to support labor demand. The relationship grew over 50 years, and today 4 percent of Germany's population—about the same percentage of Asian-Americans in the U.S.—are of Turkish heritage. Overall, Germany has the third largest immigrant population in the world (after the U.S. and Russia), and 12 percent of Germany's population—about the same percentage of African-Americans in the U.S.—are immigrants.

Not everyone in Germany is pleased about this. Although official policy promotes immigration, Germans appear troubled by the increased presence of Halal supermarkets, döner kebab restaurants, and, especially, mosques. [According to a 2012 study](#), 80 percent of Germans believe Islam deprives women of their rights, while only 29 percent say that “the Muslims who live here are part of Germany.” Sixty percent of Germans say immigration places too much pressure on public services. And two of every three Germans “fully disagree” with stating “Islam and Christianity are equally German”—even though just 13 percent of Germans attend church weekly.

Therein lies Chancellor Merkel's dilemma. On the one hand, Germany's economy has thrived because from immigration; on the other, many Germans see Islam itself as a national security threat. “German politics are inherently racist,” a Berlin-based think tank director tells me pessimistically. “We say we are welcoming, but then reject any exercise of religion. Eating pork and drinking alcohol are almost requirements in German culture, and abstaining from either is suspicious. Islam is not compatible with German identity.”

Which brings us back to the German heartland of Tröglitz. Katrin described her concerns about welcoming the asylum seekers as economic, not religious; she thought the state spent too much money on “war refugees,” threatening the social welfare of natural citizens. She also saw asylum seekers and Turkish guest workers as two different groups. “All of the problems come back to people not having enough money,” said Katrin, and she feared the refugees, if granted asylum, would take more from Tröglitz than they would give.

It is these fears that have made Tröglitz symbolic beyond its size. On April 4, a group of neo-Nazis infiltrated Tröglitz and lit on fire the abandoned building intended to house refugees. Tröglitz residents condemned the act, and even those opposed to welcoming the migrants expressed anger that their city had attracted interest from far right activists. Following the arson, former Mayor Markus Nierth received a message: “Hermann Göring has written to me and told me to shoot you.” Nierth now lives under 24-hour police protection.

Europe's Muslim population will likely double by 2050, and if the laws and trends remain constant, many Muslim immigrants will find their way to German cities. In 2010, half of the players on Germany's World Cup team had an immigrant background. Turkish supermarkets stock sausage and salami in halal varieties. The question is not whether Islam will become part of German identity, but how much social unrest Germany will endure as it does.

As increasing numbers of migrants drown while attempting Mediterranean Sea crossings, European policymakers claim they intend to “tighten border security” around the Schengen Area's sea and land perimeter; heighten criminal penalties for human smuggling; and increase deportations of those whose asylum applications are rejected. Such measures might sound eerily familiar to U.S. border policies, none of which curbed Latin American migration. Only Mexico's economic improvement slowed net migration to zero; Central Americans, who face more severe conditions, continue to come to the United States, both legally and illegally, in high numbers.

Throughout Germany, and most countries in northern Europe, traffic lights blink yellow whenever changing, not only before the red light (as in the U.S.), but also prior to the green signal. This is how Germany approaches policy, with caution and preparation as requirements for any change. With immigration, the public might eventually reject Merkel's policies and demand restrictions to welcoming more refugees. But thus far Germany has been patient, resisting alterations to their asylum law and affirming their *Willkommenskultur* as part of a deeper existential struggle. “The Nazis must not be allowed to win,” Nierth said after his death threat, defending current asylum policy as a stand against fascism.

Seventy years ago, when the Allies ended the Nazi regime, few would have predicted that defending the rights of Syrian refugees would equate to a political statement against oppression. But Nierth's moral defense of both German law and common humanity marks a constant thread in modern German history. Unlike the Netherlands, where a supposed culture of

tolerance has clear political limits, Germany has backed its rhetoric with action. Whatever criticisms opponents may have of Germany's asylum policy, they cannot accuse the Germans of inconsistency in ideals, or lacking a willingness to sacrifice.



The determined German capacity to tear down economic, social, cultural, and political walls that Nierth's courage represents will define both the country and the continent's future. At Berlin's Checkpoint Charlie, tourists pose for pictures in front of two U.S. Army signs that mark where the American Sector started and ended. Although the placards illustrate Germany's recent division, they also mark its path ahead. Germany is leaving the American Sector, [confronting a resurgent Russia](#), [uniting immediate neighbors](#), and shaping Europe's demographic change. In 1945, the United States celebrated Deutschland's defeat; twenty-five years ago, a seemingly permanent wall that symbolized the Iron Curtain was destroyed. It is the psychological obstacles of culture, religion, and ethnicity that will most acutely shape German leadership of 21st century Europe, and the world will be watching—both in Tröglitz and throughout Germany—to see which barriers fall, and which ones endure.

Of related interest:

[Germany in the 21st Century, Part 1: The Fourth Reich](#)

[Germany in the 21st Century, Part II: The View from the Netherlands](#)