

The Immigration of Guest Workers to the Federal Republic of Germany from the 1950s to the 1970s: A Story of Success?

When the Second World War was over, many cities in Germany were lying in ruins and most men had fallen or at least lost their working ability. With the following post-war boom of the economy, the young Republic had to face a big lack of workers. The solution favoured by the economy was the recruitment of guest workers mostly from Mediterranean countries, namely Italy, Spain, Greece, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, Yugoslavia and, most of all, Turkey. It promised not only a greater offer of workers, but also the possibility to get easily rid of them once they would have become superfluous in case of recession. For the home countries, signing the recruitment contracts meant a reduction of unemployed people. But what about the motivation of these migrant workers themselves who had to leave their family and culture behind? The most important reasons surely were the economic conditions at home. Although leaving family, friends and familiar surroundings always meant a huge loss for the men. They chose to emigrate because of the money which they hoped would enable them to lead a better life afterwards. Due to that, about 2.3 million guest workers immigrated to Germany until 1973.

At the beginning, both sides saw guest-working as a temporary condition. The workers were not supposed to stay and when they arrived in Germany, they did not know that this country would later be called 'home' by their children. Most of the workers were not even able to read their working contracts as they were not translated into their mother tongue. All in all it can be said that the efforts of the German government to make the foreign workers feel welcome kept within a limit. There was no offer of language courses or other help in integration at first and discrimination against them in their German companies was huge. Often these foreign workers lived in bad conditions and in constant fear of being made redundant at short notice.

Feeling insecure about their future lots of immigrants did not see a proper use in learning the language of a country that they might be expelled from within the next year. Meanwhile the German government did not give much thought to the increasing number of foreigners and when the economy finally collapsed in 1973 due to global recession and energy crisis, the recruitment of guest workers stopped. However, Germany faced a continuing increase in the number of foreigners. What had happened?

As the years went by, those guest workers who did not return to their home countries decided to have their families join them in Germany. The longer the immigrants lived in the Federal Republic of Germany, the more rights they gained, according to German law. After all, they paid taxes just like the German workers. In addition, the immigration of their family members had not been forbidden through the recruitment stop. So a considerable foreign proportion of the population had now become a fact of life.

Unfortunately, apart from the economic point of view, their history of cannot be seen as a great success. The German government and the companies offering employment missed many chances to push integration forward and to stop discrimination. Today, we can still watch the consequences of failed integration policies of the past, but with time the Federal Republic has learnt from her mistakes and has finally accepted being an immigration country.