The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany

This book provides the first English-language history of the post-war labor migration to West Germany. Drawing on government bulletins, statements by political leaders, parliamentary arguments, industry newsletters, social welfare studies, press coverage, and the cultural production of immigrant artists and intellectuals, Rita Chin offers an account of West German public debate about guest workers. She traces the historical and ideological shifts around the meanings of the labor migration, moving from the concept of guest workers as a “temporary labor supplement” in the 1950s and 1960s to early ideas about “multiculturalism” by the end of the 1980s. She argues that the efforts to come to terms with the permanent residence of guest workers, especially Muslim Turks, forced a major rethinking of German identity, culture, and nation. What began as a policy initiative to fuel the economic miracle ultimately became a much broader discussion about the parameters of a specifically German brand of multiculturalism.

Rita Chin is an assistant professor of history at the University of Michigan. She previously taught at Oberlin College. She has received fellowships from the Social Science Research Council and the German Academic Exchange Service and grants from the American Historical Association and the American Philosophical Society. She was recently awarded a fellowship from the Fulbright Program to participate in the German Fulbright Commission’s seminar on Muslims in Germany and France.
“This important, thought-provoking book probes the evolution of the postwar ‘guest worker’ as social and economic phenomenon, political problem, and ideological construct. Spanning the half-century following World War II, Chin explores how the uncontroversial embrace of labor recruitment as economic strategy gradually gave way to skeptical debates regarding the possibility of integrating Muslim Turks into democratic society. Along the way, she convincingly shows that “the guest worker problem” was never a marginal minority issue, but central to our understanding of postwar German history and contemporary Europe. A timely intervention and outstanding achievement.”

– Heide Fehrenbach, author of Race after Hitler and Cinema in Democratizing Germany, Northern Illinois University

“This book could not be more timely. At a moment when Europeans debate whether an expanded European Union should include Turkey and critics of multiculturalism insist on reinforcing the lines that separate people of different ethnicities, Rita Chin offers a superb study of debates over racial and cultural difference in Germany from the 1950s to the present. A model of interdisciplinary scholarship, Chin’s book moves from an analysis of guest worker recruitment patterns and migration to insightful readings of literature and film; she follows guest workers into labor markets and the marketplace of ideas and the media. She has much to say about what has facilitated and what has impeded the move toward the acceptance of diversity in Germany.”

– Robert Moeller, University of California, Irvine

“A pioneering cultural and intellectual history that shows how a policy initiative designed to provide labor for the West German economic miracle generated far-reaching public debates on the shape of German culture, German citizenship, and the German nation. Tracing the key role of Turkish/German writers and artists in initiating or transforming these discussions, the book is a must-read for anyone interested in German multiculturalism, the history of minorities, and the changing spheres of political discourse over the last forty years. A major accomplishment.”

– Uta Poiger, University of Washington

“This book by Rita Chin is a highly original combination of political history and literary science. Taking the theory of representation as her point of departure, Rita Chin demonstrates an amazing talent at pointing out interrelations and intersections between texts as different as law codes, political speeches, parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, and novels, without ever succumbing to reductionism. The result is a fascinating ethnography of the Zeitgeist and the mood of different periods in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. The impact of this truly scholarly work goes far beyond migration research. It makes clear how identity, culture, and nation have constantly been re-thought throughout the history of the Federal Republic. With this new and sensational approach to the history of labour migration and the history of the Federal Republic, Rita Chin convincingly manages to close the gap between the approaches of political science and cultural studies.”

– Werner Schiffauer, Europa Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder, Germany
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in Postwar Germany

RITA CHIN
University of Michigan
For Jay
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Over the course of this project, I have often encountered the same question: Why would someone like you write a book about the German guest worker question? The truth is that migration has been a part of my life from the very beginning. Had it not been for my parents’ decision to move from Malaysia to the United States when I was an infant, I certainly would not have had the opportunity to become a professional historian. I also like to think that the experience of growing up in a first-generation migrant family has helped me become more sensitive to the complexities of the issues that run through these pages.

My first thanks go to John Toews and Hillel Kieval, who cultivated my deep interest in European history while I was an undergraduate and master’s student at the University of Washington. Without their example and encouragement, a Ph.D. in history would have seemed a far less appealing and attainable goal. At the University of California, Berkeley, Martin Jay provided wise and steady counsel during the early stages of this project and has continued to offer unfailing support. I am particularly grateful for his suggestion to explore a somewhat unconventional topic in German cultural history, as well as for his personal generosity and kindness. I would also like to thank Gerald Feldman for his valuable advice and unstinting assistance. His genuine enthusiasm for this topic has been a major asset through the entire process.

Many others were involved during the researching and writing of this book. In Germany, I would like to thank Saliha Scheinhardt, Yüksel Pazarkaya, Zehra Çirak, Sema Poyraz, and the late Kemal Kurt for agreeing to interviews and sharing their experiences with me. My ongoing conversations with Zafer Şenocak have been enormously stimulating and
a source of inspiration. Irmgard Ackermann provided invaluable access to her private collection of newspaper clippings and clarified details about the history of the Institut für Deutsch als Fremdsprache. Börte Sagaster was a much-appreciated friend, interlocutor, and playmate in Berlin. Yasemin Yildiz welcomed me into the company of her family in both Söke and Hamburg; she was an important early sounding board for my ideas and has remained a valued discussion partner.

For citations, readings of drafts, conference panels, and general advice, I thank Leslie Adelson, Paul Anderson, Volker Berghahn, Michal Bodemann, Ayşe Çağlar, John Carson, Joshua Cole, Marcia Colish, Matthew Countryman, Dario Gaggio, Deniz Göktürk, Atina Grossmann, Gottfried Hagen, Gabrielle Hecht, Elizabeth Heineman, Dagmar Herzog, Steven Hochstadt, Christhard Hoffmann, Maria Höhn, Nancy Hunt, Kali Israel, Konrad Jarausch, Martha Jones, Anton Kaes, Yasemin Karakaşoğlu, Mary Kelley, the late Eva Kolinsky, Kader Konuk, Wendy Kozol, Harry Liebersohn, David Luft, Ruth Mandel, Andy Markovits, Isaac Miller, Michele Mitchell, Leslie Moch, Gina Morantz-Sanchez, Rainer Ohliger, Damani Partridge, Robin Queen, Sonya Rose, Azade Seyhan, Leonard Smith, Levent Soysal, Scott Spector, Arlene Teraoka, John Toews, Marilyn Veteto-Reese, Sabine von Dirke, James West, and Jenny White. Two reading groups at the University of Michigan served as important sites for presenting my work: Alamanya, a fortuitous and unique collective of faculty and graduate students working on Turks in Germany; and the History Department's Junior Faculty Colloquium. I thank the members of these groups for their many forms of helpful commentary. Robert Moeller deserves special mention for reading the manuscript in its entirety and providing incredibly useful criticisms and suggestions. Two other individuals offered friendship and intellectual camaraderie far beyond the usual standards. Heide Fehrenbach gave me feedback on the entire manuscript and has been a valued source of criticism, advice, and moral support. Geoff Eley pushed me to broaden the framework for the project beyond its original form as a synoptic intellectual history; he provided many helpful comments on specific chapters and ultimately read the manuscript from beginning to end.

The book would not have been possible without the financial support of various institutions. A grant from the Social Science Research Council's Berlin Program for German and European Studies facilitated the bulk of my research in Germany. Fellowships from the Department of History at UC Berkeley and Pomona College afforded me the time to write. A Powers Travel Grant from Oberlin College and a Bernadotte Schmidt
Acknowledgments

Research Grant from the American Historical Association enabled me to return to Germany for follow-up research. The University of Michigan provided generous postdoctoral funding that gave me the opportunity to rethink and rewrite the book in its entirety. For archival help, I thank the staff members of the Institut für vergleichende Sozialforschung and the Freie Universität’s Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft in Berlin, the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen in Stuttgart, the Institut für Deutsch als Fremdsprache in Munich, and the Deutsche Literaturarchiv in Marbach. I am grateful to Beau Case at the University of Michigan Graduate Library for tracking down some particularly difficult citations. In addition, I wish to thank Lewis Bateman, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for his patience in waiting for the manuscript and his remarkable efficiency once it was done. I am grateful to production editor Janis Bolster and copy editors Jennifer Collier and Marie Deer for shepherding the manuscript through the production process. Thanks also go to Sarah Miller for help with proofreading.

Finally, I want to express heartfelt gratitude to my family. My parents, Lay and Mari Chin, have given me unwavering support and encouragement in everything I set my mind to. Their unconditional love has been a sustaining force in my life. I deeply appreciate Connie and Jim Cook’s interest in my work and innumerable kindnesses over the years. Thanks, too, to Amy Cook for providing periodic interludes away from work. Jay Cook has lived with this book from its inception and read each page many times over. His own work and high critical standards have been an inspiration, and our countless conversations about every aspect of this project have made the end product much better. His love, friendship, patience, and steadfast partnership are the foundation upon which this book was written.