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978-0-521-69022-5 - The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany

Rita Chin

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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.

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“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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Acknowledgments

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.

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