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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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1.3.3 Migration in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

Ondřej Daniel, Ido de Haan, and Isabelle Surun

Introduction

While the nineteenth century can be seen as the age of voluntary migration, when millions of Europeans looking for work, livelihood, and freedom were on the move—from countryside to cities, from East to West, both within and beyond Europe—the twentieth century presents a much more complicated picture. Its complexity partly stems from the manifold experiences of a wide variety of people and groups, ranging from Russian emigrants in Europe after the Russian Revolution in 1917 to Czechoslovakian refugees after 1968; from Turkish labour migrants since the mid-1950s to affluent British migrants in the Costa del Sol in the late twentieth century.

One important factor that shaped these experiences was the state, which played a much more active role in controlling migration from 1900 onwards. Particularly during the first half of the twentieth century, large groups of people were pushed from one country to another by contradictory attempts by nation states to restrict migration and to enforce population transfer. Forced migration became one of the instruments of ethnic cleansing—next to forced assimilation and genocide. It contributed to ‘the unmixing of peoples’ which by mid-century had resulted in a Europe of ethnically homogenised nation states.

In the first part of the century, the flow of migration still largely moved away from Europe; in the second half, migrants started to move towards Europe, challenging the national orientation of the post-war welfare—and, to a lesser extent, also the communist—state. And while European migration before the nineteenth century already took place in a global context, a new surge of globalisation after 1970 inaugurated a global migration system. In this context, Europe was but one region among many between which people

moved, yet it also created the conditions in which the channelling of migration came to be seen as a collective European responsibility.

Migration in the Age of Territoriality: The First World War and the Interwar Period

The historian Charles Maier has identified the period between 1870 and 1950 as ‘the age of territoriality’. In this period, European states defined their mutual relations increasingly in terms of competition, both on the continent and in imperial conquest beyond Europe. In this context, migration transformed from a nineteenth-century solution to the Malthusian fear of overpopulation into a threat to national strength, both because enterprising people left the territory of the state and because other people, considered dangerous or unfit, came in.

This Darwinian view of the relationship between states was one of the causes of the First World War, which in itself was an important impetus for the dislocation of people in Europe. The scale of this war—geographically, in terms of the total mobilisation of the population, and in the extent of bloodshed—brought about a massive movement of people who tried to flee from their homes. Around 500,000 people from Eastern Prussia and 800,000 from Galicia fled from the Russian Army, while the counteroffensive of the Central Powers caused many Russians to flee to the east, contributing to a total of seven million refugees in 1917.

The end of the First World War initiated yet another wave of forced migration. During the collapse of the Russian Empire, the Russian Revolution, and subsequent Civil War, some two million people tried to escape from violence, fleeing to the West: to Berlin, Paris, and also the United States. The defeat of the Central Powers resulted in the forced migration of some one million German nationals and Hungarians to Germany. This was not only a consequence of the war, but also of the following peace treaties which reinforced this process of ethnic sortition. The underlying principle of national self-determination informed the creation of new nation states, each of which claimed the right to define the parameters of national identity, and to insist on the removal of people who did not fit this definition. Often, this took the form of deliberate population exchanges.

These transfers were a prelude to the migration restrictions that states came to impose over the course of the 1920s. These restrictions were not only motivated by racist ideas of cultural homogeneity, but often supported by trade unions opposed to the import of cheap labour. Such ideas informed the United States Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed quotas that severely limited the immigration of Eastern and Southern Europeans, as well as Asians. But within Europe as well, states closed their borders to foreigners. In many

states, temporary wartime restrictions on migration became permanent barriers. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Aliens Restriction Act of 1914 was replaced in 1920 by the Aliens Order. The German Empire had already initiated its first restrictions on immigration before the war, with a requirement to carry passports and the compulsory return of seasonal migrant workers during the winter. These restrictions were made permanent in the Weimar Republic, which required that every alien crossing the borders of the Reich in either direction had to present a passport with a visa.

But even then, there were also reverse trends. After many young men had died in the war, a 'National Alliance for the Growth of the French Population' was established, which successfully campaigned for the reception of immigrants in France, including some 500,000 Poles, one million Italians, and 300,000 Belgians. The economic problems of the Weimar Republic caused a wave of emigration to the Netherlands of some 200,000 German female domestic workers and an even larger number of male factory workers and miners. This only ended after the economic crisis impacted France and the Netherlands in the early 1930s.

German-Jewish refugees were welcomed much less enthusiastically: they were even formally banned from entering the Netherlands after the number of refugees surged in the aftermath of the November Pogrom of 1938. At that point, France had also established restrictions on migration, as had all other countries. At the conference in Évian (France) of 6–15 July 1938, assembled by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to discuss the fate of German-Jewish refugees, none of the thirty-two countries present—except for the Dominican Republic—were prepared to accept Jewish refugees.

Migration in the Age of Territoriality: The Second World War

The turmoil in Europe created by the rise of Hitler and German expansionism brought about population movements which overwhelmed formal legal barriers. While the occupation of the Sudetenland in 1938 had already chased several hundred thousand inhabitants from their homes, the start of the war in September 1939 dislocated a huge number of people who were caught between the frontlines. Immediately after the German invasion, hundreds of thousands of civilians in Poland and the Baltics fled the region, while around 600,000 Polish prisoners of war (POWs) ended up in German and Soviet camps. After Poland was overrun and its inhabitants robbed of their statehood, some three million inhabitants—half of them Jewish—were forcibly expelled from the western parts of the country and sent to the newly-established General Government. Many were sent to concentration and labour camps, where most

perished. Elsewhere in Europe, people were also forced to leave their homes or flee from violence. In 1939, some 500,000 Spaniards fled to France after the collapse of the Spanish Republic (the 'Retirada'), while some 100,000 Greeks left Thrace and Macedonia after it was occupied by Bulgaria. Italian expansion forced Serbs, Hungarians, Croatians, and Slovenians—perhaps 500,000 people in total—out of parts of the South-East of Europe.

The number of people forced to leave their home increased exponentially after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The German invasion of the Soviet Union constituted the start of the Holocaust, the destruction of the Jews of Europe, when the large-scale and lethal violence against Jews in occupied Poland transformed into a systematic attempt to remove and physically extinguish all Jews present in Nazi-occupied Europe. While Jews were deported, some 7.5 million people—German nationals and forced labourers, mainly from Poland and the Soviet Union, but also over two million from Western Europe—were brought into the pre-war realm of the German Empire. Moreover, the German Army interned some 5.7 million Soviet POWs, of whom about half were starved to death or shot.

At the same time, the Soviets held some three million German POWs, of whom some 380,000 died in custody. They were only a small portion of the people on Soviet territory who were subject to deportation or forced migration. This had started as early as the 1930s, with dekulakisation, which targeted some two million people between 1929 and 1932, the large-scale purges of the 1930s, and the Holodomor (or Great Famine) in Soviet Ukraine from 1932–1933, all of which devastated the lives of millions of people.

As was the case at the end of the First World War, the end of the Second World War saw another wave of forced migrations. While the Soviets had gladly expelled political enemies in 1917, they now insisted on the repatriation of all Russians in the West, not only to bring back Soviet citizens, but also to prevent the creation of foreign opposition to the Soviet regime, as had emerged after the First World War. The largest group consisted of Russian POWs in German custody. Before being allowed to resettle, they were all assessed for political reliability and productive capacity. As a result, some fifteen percent of four million were directly sent through to Soviet forced labour camps, creating fear and opposition of the last half a million Soviet POWs, who in 1946 resisted repatriation.

They supplemented a much larger group of around eleven million displaced persons (DPs), most of whom remained in Germany, now occupied by the Allied Forces. Apart from POWs, this group consisted of forced labourers, Jews, and political prisoners interned in concentration camps. Many of them returned home before the end of 1945, yet the 250,000 Jewish DPs from all over Europe who had survived the German camps had little to return to, as in

1946–1947 another wave of antisemitic violence against Jewish survivors swept over parts of Eastern Europe. Many of them emigrated to Western Europe, the United States, or Palestine.

And again, just as after the First World War, the peace settlements at the end of the Second World War forced yet another massive number of people to leave their homes. The Soviet military campaign had already motivated many Germans in Eastern Europe to flee to the East. Yet even more followed after the Potsdam Agreement of August 1945, which stated that “the transfer to Germany of German populations [...] will have to be undertaken.” This led to the expulsion of about 3.5 million German nationals (‘*Volksdeutsche*’) from Polish territory, 3.2 million people from Czechoslovakia, and about 225,000 people from Hungary. Despite the stipulation that this “should be effected in an orderly and humane manner,” it is estimated that some two million died in the course of these deportations. The large majority of these ‘*Heimatvertriebenen*’ (people chased from their homeland) settled in the western occupation zones, bringing the total number of migrants in the newly established Federal Republic of Germany to some twelve million people.

The transnational nature of the problem of forced migration during the first half of the twentieth century led to the development of institutions dedicated to this cause, in the context of newly emerging forms of global governance. The first attempts at the international concertation of migration came in 1921, when the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930) was appointed High Commissioner on behalf of the League of Nations in connection with the problem of Russian refugees. This project became further entrenched in the ‘*Convention Relating to the International Status of Refugees*’ of 28 October 1933. Yet as the failure of the Évian conference in 1938 had demonstrated, there was no strong commitment to such collective responsibility. A more successful collaboration only emerged in response to the massive refugee crisis at the end of the Second World War, when the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was established in 1943. Despite its successful management of the repatriation of millions of displaced persons, it suffered from disagreements that worsened due to the emergent Cold War and fell apart in 1947. It was replaced by the International Refugee Organization, which in 1952 in turn made way for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Migration in East and West during the Cold War

From the 1950s onwards, migration patterns in Europe started to change. After more than half a century of often very violent and highly lethal population transfers, deportations, forced migrations, and the flight from violence of

tens of millions of people, the demography of Europe had been drastically reordered. As a result of this 'ethnic sortition', European states were now composed of much more homogeneous national groups, which at the same time consisted of many people who were very recent migrants. The Cold War and consequent division of Europe also led to a bifurcation in migration flows: in the east, countries were generally confronted with the emigration of political and ethnic minorities, further reinforcing the cultural uniformity of these countries, despite some immigration from developing countries (for example of Vietnamese students and workers into East Germany). Western Europe on the other hand became a region of immigration, which led to new forms of diversity.

In the context of the Cold War and the imposition of communist rule in Eastern Europe, many fled from oppression. Until the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, around 3.5 million people fled from East to West Germany. Also, tens of thousands of people fled from other communist countries annually, with surges after the uprisings in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) and the imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981. After the partial liberalisation of emigration policies in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, more than half of the remaining 2.5 million Jews fled from the persistent antisemitic tendencies they had faced there. A final chapter of emigration from communist countries resulted from the war that ensued in 1991 after the break-up of Yugoslavia, after which some 400,000 people fled to the West, with half of them ending up in Germany.

The picture for Western Europe in the post-war period is very different. There, immigration set the tone, from Southern Europe and Northern Africa, but also from the former colonies, after the Second World War brought down the colonial empires of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and finally also Portugal.

From 1948 onwards, Western Europe went through an extended period of unprecedented economic growth, which lasted until the mid-1970s. Rising investment, wages, and consumer demand contributed to acute shortages on the labour market, especially for low-skilled and lower-paid labour. This inspired national governments in close cooperation with employers' organisations to invite able-bodied people to come to work in the industrial centres of Europe. Initially, many came from the poorest regions of Italy, Spain, and Portugal to the urban centres in their own country. But soon this internal migration was overtaken by migration to France, Germany, and the Benelux countries. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, several million Italians, around one million Spaniards, and 1.5 million Portuguese—a fifth of the latter's total population—ended up in the factories and mines of the industrial

heartland, or as cleaners or domestic servants in the quickly expanding service economy of North-Western Europe. These mass migrations contributed to the depopulation of poorer regions in Southern Europe—a loss which was compensated by the very substantial remittances sent back home. These savings, as well as the temporary residence permits for these ‘guest workers’ underlined the expectation, both of the labour migrants and the host societies, that the former would return home to enjoy the fruits of their labour once the work was done.

But while their position in the host countries remained provisional—in terms of political and social rights, housing, social support, education, and cultural integration—the duration of their stays lengthened, because of the lack of prospects in their homelands, but also because the demand for labour only grew, leading to the attraction of workers from other countries, notably Morocco and Turkey. The governments, and sometimes also members of the indigenous population of their new homelands, were however ill-prepared, and sometimes outright hostile to the idea of integrating these newcomers on a more permanent basis. In this respect, the position of guest workers started to resemble that of the second type of immigrant in post-war Europe: those people within colonial empires.

(Post)Colonial Migration

Colonial rulers in the first half of the twentieth century had experimented with a variety of halfway modes of citizenship. The neo-colonial arrangements emerging during the course of decolonisation continued these ambivalent forms of colonial citizenship, as substantial numbers of formerly colonised people made their way to the imperial centres of power, via family ties, labour migration, or as refugees. They contributed to the creation of a multi-ethnic European society, which—due to their failure to acknowledge the violence involved in its ethnic homogeneity—many Europeans found hard to accept.

In the post-imperial societies of Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal, immigration from former colonies became a major phenomenon in the last third of the twentieth century. It occurred at the same time as empires were breaking up, and contributed to a recomposition of societies in North-Western Europe. This type of migration is part of the long history of exchange between colony and metropole, which gives it a particular chronology and certain characteristics.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the presence of populations originating from the colonies was minimal in the imperial metropolises. Migration between metropolises and colonies had typically worked the other way

round: European empires encouraged the emigration of their citizens to settler colonies. From the 1920s onwards settlement colonialism even experienced a remarkable boom, after the United States had limited entry to its territory through quota laws, practically ending mass immigration from Europe. For example, the colonies, especially the dominions, became the most important destination for British emigration after the First World War. The state sought to control and intensify this process: the Overseas Settlement Committee (1920) encouraged the settlement of demobilised soldiers by financing their journey, and the Empire Settlement Act (1922) facilitated the departure from Britain of more than 400,000 people. Similarly, French emigration to Algeria and the Maghreb protectorates (Morocco and Tunisia) increased in the 1920s and 1930s. In the Italian Empire, mass emigration began in the mid-1930s with the settlement programme launched by Mussolini, to benefit the unemployed and landless peasants. Portugal belatedly launched a supervised emigration programme to its African colonies (Angola and Mozambique), which accounted for fifty percent of Portuguese emigration in the 1950s.

Over the course of the century, many of these European settlers were forced to return. Decolonisation after the Second World War led to the repatriation of millions of Europeans (British, French, Italian, Belgian, Portuguese, and Dutch). These returnees benefited from assisted return and reintegration programmes, which they often considered insufficient. The auxiliaries of the colonial armies, however, often received less support: for example, the Harkis (auxiliaries of the French army in Algeria) who managed to relocate to France at the end of the Algerian Independence War (1954–1962) were permanently housed in camps.

Labour migration to the colonial metropolises began with the First World War. For example, more than 225,000 workers were recruited in the French colonies to replace the mobilised workers in the factories. By 1931, there were about 100,000 Algerians in France, and although their movement was not regulated, the authorities sought to control them through health and social institutions. Algerian immigration increased sharply after 1945 and the Algerian War of Independence did not interrupt this movement, but led to its stabilisation: periods of residence became longer, and family immigration increased.

A similar pattern was present in the decolonisation of the Dutch Empire: some 300,000 migrants, predominantly Eurasians of mixed descent, came to the Netherlands between 1946 and 1964. Before and after Surinamese Independence in 1975, some 190,000 people—almost half of the population—arrived in the former ‘motherland’. In this period another 100,000 people from the Dutch Antilles moved to the European part of the Dutch Kingdom.

While Great Britain put an end to the free movement of Indians in 1947, after Indian Independence, France on the contrary introduced agreements with its former colonies that became independent in the early 1960s, allowing entry into French territory without a visa or residence permit. This liberal migration policy was brutally curtailed with the 1973–1974 oil crisis. Restrictive measures were put in place in the early 1990s, transforming those nationals of territories which had formerly enjoyed a form of imperial citizenship into foreigners.

Conclusion

The end of the twentieth century, in stark contrast to its beginnings, has been characterised by free, peaceful, and voluntary movement. The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989–1990 ushered in a period of seemingly frictionless mobility in the supranational framework of the European Union. The adoption of the Schengen Agreement (1985) and Convention (1990) opened up an area of free movement between EU member states, but also put in place ‘compensatory measures’ to secure external borders and prevent them from being crossed by nationals of non-member countries.

With the Eastern enlargement of 2004 and 2007, which brought the states of the former Eastern Bloc into the fold, Europeans were free to travel and work throughout their continent. Turkey had already been granted candidate status in 1999, promising to expand the area of free movement beyond the continent. The nation state, which had played such a pivotal role in the control of migration throughout the century, seemed to have been relegated to the sidelines of European history.

The beginning of the twenty-first century has clouded this optimistic image. Migration has once more become a contentious issue: the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015—the mass migration of people fleeing wars and unrest in the Middle East—arguably led to a rise in populism and polarisation in European politics. Frontex, the agency that has been operating the integrated management of Europe’s borders since 2005, has been strengthened and expanded since 2016. It embodies a migration policy that turns the Schengen Area into what is sometimes called ‘Fortress Europe’: a tightly sealed, self-contained and exclusive space. Migration also played a central role in the 2016 referendum on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU, with the potential accession of Turkey treated as a particularly threatening prospect, despite the fact that accession negotiations have stalled for years. Yet, these contemporary concerns pale in comparison to the staggering numbers of people forced to migrate around, into and out of Europe over the course of the violent twentieth century.

Discussion questions

1. The twentieth century saw unprecedented movement of people in Europe. Describe how this experience differed in different parts of Europe, e.g. Eastern Europe and Western Europe.
2. How has migration shaped Europe's engagement with the rest of the world over the course of the twentieth century?
3. Migration is a contentious issue in Europe today. How does the current situation differ from the twentieth century? How has this experience changed or remained the same?

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