

Book Review

**Jennifer A. Miller (2018) *Turkish Guest Workers in Germany: Hidden Lives and Contested Borders, 1960s to 1980s*.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press. ISBN 9781487521929
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Reviewed by Edward Dunsworth, University of Toronto, Canada

From 1945 to 1974, millions of temporary labour migrants in bilateral programmes criss-crossed Europe, taking jobs to rebuild the war-torn continent and reboot its industrial production. Perhaps most famous among them were the Turkish *gastarbeiter*, or “guest workers”, who made their way to West Germany, marking the beginning of Germany’s ethnic Turkish population that today numbers in the low millions. In recent years, this community has been the source of great anxiety for German commentators and policy-makers, who have fretted about the so-called “parallel society” of Muslim minorities leading to social alienation and radicalisation.

In her new book, *Turkish Guest Workers in Germany*, historian Jennifer A. Miller argues that such meta-narratives paint an overly simplistic picture of the history of Turks in Germany. Via close examination of the early years of the Turkish guest worker programme – based on transnational research conducted in Germany, Turkey and the Netherlands – Miller aims to deliver a significantly more complex portrayal, one that privileges the textured stories of individual migrants over totalising narratives that characterise Turks as either “social problems” or exploited labour. In so doing, Miller not only contributes to debates about multiculturalism and Muslim minorities in Germany, but also adds important findings to three growing areas of interest in the broader scholarship on labour migration and guest worker programmes: the transnational structuring of labour mobility; the limits and exceptions to “managed migration”; and migrants’ subjective experiences (including those related to sexuality).

The book comprises five thoroughly researched, well-presented and interesting chapters that together accomplish many of Miller’s goals. Unfortunately, they are betrayed by an introductory chapter beset by a range of problems. I don’t, however, wish for these shortcomings to overshadow the book’s many positive offerings, so I will put its best foot forward and begin with the five body chapters, each of which explores a relatively distinct aspect of Turkish guest workers’ lives and experiences. The first three chapters follow key steps in migrants’ journeys to and settlement in West Germany. Chapter One, “The Invitation”, begins in Turkey, where it chronicles the procedures of recruitment and application for potential participants. Securing a spot in the programme was often a lengthy, expensive and stressful affair, requiring multiple trips to German liaison offices and invasive, often humiliating, medical examinations. By examining pre-departure aspects of the programme, Miller is able to demonstrate that the designs of administrators began to break down at the earliest stages, as prospective participants and employers alike found ways to skirt regulations.

Chapter Two, “In Transit”, continues the voyage, following migrants onto the trains that carried them to West Germany, a trip that Miller argues was an important part of “becoming a

guest worker". The chapter also contains a stimulating discussion of the fraught symbolism of guest workers' train travel. On the one hand, travel by rail represented a voyage of modernisation for Turkish guest workers, matching many of Turkey's goals for the programme. On the other, the "cattle car"-like conditions on German trains called up memories of the wartime transport of Jews and others to concentration camps and to perform enslaved labour and was the source of significant anxieties on the part of West German authorities about the country's international image.

Chapter Three picks up the story in West Germany, focusing specifically on housing, which Miller convincingly presents as a key site in which differentiation between Turkish guest workers and Germans was established and maintained. Not only were Turkish migrants housed in poor-quality barracks and hostels apart from local communities, but they were also often subject to invasive supervision from dormitory managers who fined residents for having messy rooms and attempted to police their social lives. These conditions prompted resistance from Turkish guest workers and also fuelled practices of escapism, via visits to nightclubs, travels down the autobahn or immersion in books.

Chapter Four looks in detail at one particular form of escapism: the crossing of Turkish men from West to East Berlin in pursuit of relationships (of varying characteristics) with East German women. Here Miller makes excellent use of files from the East German secret police (*Stasi*), along with other sources, to piece together the experiences of guest workers in three overlapping categories: "lovers, border crossers, and transgressors" (p. 108). The chapter is intriguing for a number of reasons. For one, it helps Miller's central goal of presenting a more complex portrayal of Turkish guest workers, who appear here neither as exploited labour nor as unassimilable Muslims, but instead as young men crossing boundaries, both political and cultural, seeking adventure, companionship and sex. It also positions guest workers as Cold War actors in fascinating ways. The *Stasi* viewed them as both threats (for their potential to marry East German women and facilitate emigration, and for their potential of being spies) and as resources (some Turkish guest workers in fact worked as informants for the secret police). For East German women, on the other hand, Turkish guest workers crossing from West Berlin were harbingers of "Western consumer culture" – ironic given the men's alienation on the other side of the wall. They also, confirming *Stasi* fears, represented a ticket out for some women via both marriage and more clandestine tactics.

The final chapter explores labour activism among female guest workers, arguing that industrial strikes were a key moment of solidarity-building between Turkish and German workers, and that Turks' participation in strikes is evidence of their commitment to long-term futures in Germany. In other words, job actions marked their transition from "guest workers" to simply "workers".

The major flaws of the book come in the introduction. For starters, it is somewhat difficult to glean what exactly the book's central argument and intervention is. The introduction contains "this book" statements (i.e. statements about what the book intends to do) on pages 5, 7, 17, 23 and 24, with each one declaring a somewhat different set of objectives for the text. To be sure, most books have more than one goal, but the reader is never given any indication of which of these statements represent the book's overarching argument(s) and which are secondary points. It is not until the final "this book" statement on page 24 that Miller provides a concise overview of the text's objectives. By this point, readers are so disoriented that they are not sure whether to adopt this most recent declaration as their roadmap, or whether it needs to be combined with earlier "this book" statements to get a sense of where the book is going. Unfortunately, things only get worse in the introduction's remaining four pages, where – shockingly – the chapter summaries do not match the actual contents of the book. No mention is made, for example, of the stages of migrants' journeys that structure and provide titles for the first three chapters. For example, Chapter Two,

tightly organised around trains and train stations, is introduced thusly: “The second chapter focuses on how individual workers reflect on their initial impressions and experiences” (p. 25). Nothing is said about trains. The errors continue to pile up, as Chapter Three is described as being about “the German officials stationed at the liaison offices in Turkey, the ones who dealt with Turkish applicants first-hand ... [and who] ... stood in the middle between the official regulations and plans and the lived reality that was often makeshift, ad hoc, and just plain chaotic” (p. 25). This sounds like a fascinating chapter, and upon reading the synopsis I was excited at the prospect of reading it. Imagine my surprise and confusion upon reading in the very next paragraph that, “The third chapter examines home and private life for the first generation” (p. 26) – a very different topic than the one previously outlined, but the one that is, in fact, the subject of Chapter Three. As for the intriguing chapter on German liaison officials, it is nowhere to be found and does not appear in this book.

Though they are the most glaring, these are not the only problems with the book. Also eye-opening is the fact that the author of a book centrally concerned with the individual experiences of guest workers only conducted two oral history interviews of her own (though dozens of archived interviews are consulted). The book could also have benefitted from a more thorough engagement with oral history and memory studies, as well as with the global, non-European scholarship on guest worker programmes, much of which has trod similar thematic ground to Miller. Regardless of what might explain the much bigger problems in the introduction, that it has happened is a shame, all the more so for its potential to turn readers away from what are some truly important contributions to the study of labour, migration, multiculturalism and post-war Germany and Turkey. I hope readers are able to get past the introduction in order to find them.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

EDWARD DUNSWORTH is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Toronto. His dissertation is a transnational history of tobacco farm labour in twentieth-century Ontario, Canada. [Email: edward.dunsworth@mail.utoronto.ca]