“Guest Workers” in Mining

Historicising the Industrial Past in the Ruhr region from the Bottom Up?

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Introduction

For more than 150 years, the Ruhr valley has been shaped significantly by immigration. Since the mid-19th century, millions of young job-seeking men were drawn to the increasingly industrialising region. During the first wave, they came from the neighbouring and rural areas nearby, later from further afield, both from inside and outside the wider German territories. People from the eastern provinces of the German Empire, from East and West Prussia as well as the provinces of Posen and Silesia soon became the biggest group of “foreign” workers in the Ruhr region (Peter-Schildgen 2007; Schade/Osses 2007). More than 60 percent of these so-called “Ruhrpolen” (Ruhr Poles) worked in the local mining industry before the beginning of the First World War (Olterm 2013: 27). After the re-emergence of the Polish state in 1918, about two-thirds of the “Ruhrpolen” either returned or moved on to the coalfields of France and Belgium.

The second migration wave into the Ruhr region started after the end of the Second World War. More than 13 million refugees and expellees left the former eastern territories of Germany, many of whom ended up in the Ruhr region, usually after first settling in rural areas in Bavaria and northern (West) Germany (Kift 2011; Seidel 2019). By 1960, more than one-third of all expellees lived in North Rhine-Westphalia, with the mining and steel industries as typical fields of employment. At this point, the refugees constituted a crucial “part of the solution to the state’s labour market problem” in the immediate post-war era (Kift 2011: 137).

The third and latest wave of labour migration into the Ruhr mining industry, which will be the focus here, started in the 1950s. In the booming post-war economy, the West German government negotiated several recruitment agreements with countries in southern and south-eastern Europe as well as with two North African countries to fill the demand for cheap labour. The first agreement was signed between Germany and Italy in 1955, followed by others with Spain, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia. The recruited labourers were called “Gastarbeiter” (guest workers). Additional and special agreements also led to the (temporary) immigration of a smaller number of workers from South Korea (Pölking 2014) and Japan (Kataoka et al. 2012). This third immigration wave came at a time when the decline of the mining industry was about to start, caused by cheaper

1 A different kind of labour migration regards the forced labour of prisoners of war and, especially, of civilian workers from all over German-occupied Europe during the war. By 1944, more than 40 percent of the Ruhr mining workforce, around 163,000 people, were forced labourers (Seidel 2010).

2 All citations were translated by the author.
sources of energy and strong competition from overseas. Nevertheless, this development led to a new and temporary demand for workers in general and mine workers in particular. About fourteen million people came to the Federal Republic as so-called “guest workers”. What was planned to be a form of temporary labour migration became a permanent relocation for about three million “guest workers” and their families (Seidel 2014: 39). After foreign recruitment officially ceased in 1973, caused by the worldwide economic regression, Turkish “guest workers” became the largest group of migrants in the Ruhr area, most of whom worked in the hard coal industry. Today, there are more than 2.8 million people of Turkish descent living in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt 2015: 128 ff.), still representing one of the largest groups of people with a migration background in the country.

Without immigration, neither the Ruhr region nor its heavy industry would have existed the way both are known to us today. The importance of migration for the mining industry seems beyond question; yet, it might be asked what place the history and experiences of migration occupy in the self-image of the Ruhr today. After the decline of mining and steel, industrial heritage has become essential for the new narration of the region (Berger/Golombek/Wicke 2018: 74). During the 1970s, initiatives “from below” started to advocate both the preservation of the tangible industrial heritage and a stronger appreciation of the lifeworlds, experiences and memory of the region’s working-class communities and their culture. This process led, for instance, to the very first classification of an industrial building as a historical monument, the machine hall of the Zollern Colliery in Dortmund (Parent 2013). Cultural institutions, museums, and even trade unions and companies became key players for the memorialisation of the industrial past and the representation of regional identity. Industrial heritage was and still is a success story (Berger/Golombek/Wicke 2018). However, “an almost ghostly unanimity” characterises the stories that are told in the context of industrial heritage (Berger 2019: 512 f.). This homogenisation of narratives leads to the celebration of certain memories while others remain blind spots. Narrating labour migration as a success story, for instance, tends to neglect its more problematic aspects. One example of this standardisation of narratives can be seen in the accentuation of an all-encompassing camaraderie underground. According to this narrative, everybody was the same underground, notwithstanding where someone came from; miners needed to be able to rely on each other as every mistake, no matter how small, potentially entailed deadly consequences for all. While this narrative underscores the integrative power of the underground workplace, it nonetheless seems to contrast markedly with a public – and historical – discourse that emphasises the alleged difficulties and shortcomings of migration and “integration” in the Ruhr area (Berger 2019: 514).

Oral History, or rather: various forms of using oral testimonies and memory narrations, have been an integral part of recovering and representing the Ruhr’s industrial history. As both historical movement and method, oral history initially emerged as a tool of counterhistory, a politicised form of historiography from the bottom up. In the Ruhr region as elsewhere, the “history from below” movement sought to reset the focus on new historical subjects (e.g. women, workers, and migrants) and perspectives (e.g. everyday life). After the decline of the mining industry, local history workshops, academic historians, filmmakers, and museum practitioners began to construe miners and mining communities as historical subjects. Accordingly, personal narrations played an increasingly important role, not only as a source of research but also as an instrument