

# Can Germany Cope with the Refugees?

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## Germany's Response to the Refugee Situation: Remarkable Leadership or Fait Accompli?

a report by Matthias M. Mayer in *Newpolitik*, Bertelsmann Foundation, May 2016, available at [www.bfna.org](http://www.bfna.org)

**The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe's Refugee Crisis** by Patrick Kingsley. London: Guardian Books/Faber and Faber, 350 pp., £14.99 (paper) (to be published in the US by Liveright in January 2017)

In June I visited Tempelhof Airport in the heart of Berlin, once a showpiece of the Nazi regime and the site of the Berlin Airlift of 1948–1949. The airport stopped operating eight years ago; but in December, with eight hundred Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans, and other “unofficial immigrants” pouring into the German capital each day and municipal officials confronting an acute shortage of places to shelter them, Tempelhof became Berlin's largest refugee camp. Four cavernous hangars have been converted into holding facilities for 1,300 people, including five hundred children. The camp exposes both the successes and failures of one of the most daunting social experiments in German history: absorbing the 1.1 million refugees who flooded into this nation of 80 million in 2015 alone.

Maria Antonia Kipp, a spokesperson for Tamaja, the Berlin firm that the government has hired to run the shelter, led me through Hangar 6, which houses 540 mainly Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees. We walked down corridors lined with spartan, twenty-five-square-meter units formed by white plywood screens, each containing four double bunk beds, sleeping eight people. Arabic-speaking security guards were making the rounds as well. Although it was eleven in the morning, many refugees were asleep in their beds; others milled around the corridors, played cards on benches, helped themselves to cups of sweet tea from metal dispensers, or fiddled with their smartphones. The refugees are free to come and go as they please, but a sense of aimlessness hangs over the camp. With the exception of a handful of refugees who have found volunteer work, “nobody has a job,” Kipp told me.

Most prospective jobholders need to show proficiency in German. Though the government subsidizes language courses, achieving the level necessary to hold a job can take a year or more. In addition, only refugees considered likely to get political asylum—mainly Syrians, Iraqis, and Eritreans—qualify for the free education. (Fewer than 50 percent of Afghans have had their applications for asylum approved, only 10 percent of Pakistanis, and almost no refugees from the Balkans or Eastern Europe.) “The problem,” Kipp told me, is that the government “basically treats them all as long-term unemployed people.” The country, she said, was fine at “meeting basic needs,” but was giving many of the refugees little hope for the future.

At a phone-charging station I met Mohammed Dalush, a twenty-one-year-old university student from Damascus who fled Syria a year ago. After a months-long journey that included beatings, robberies, and detentions in smugglers' basements, he arrived in Berlin in December. He had been waiting to be assigned an apartment or a group home in Berlin for six months. But there is an acute shortage of housing in the capital, and refugee families have priority over single males. It was therefore unclear when he would move out of Tempelhof.



Refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in temporary housing at the former Tempelhof Airport, Berlin, February 2016

With no job opportunities on the horizon either, he had little to do but work out at a nearby gym and take a German course twice a week. (After months of study he could hardly construct a German sentence and spoke to me in broken English.) Each month, he told me, he travels across town to the agency in charge of finding homes for refugees, which has been sharply criticized for its delays on processing paperwork. “They tell me, ‘Come back next month,’” he said.

On August 31, 2015, Angela Merkel appeared at her summer press conference in Berlin, and reiterated Germany's willingness to open its borders to all asylum seekers—a remarkable turnabout after two years of indifference to an escalating crisis. Beginning in 2013, a growing flood of refugees fleeing war and disorder across the Middle East and Africa had crossed the Mediterranean Sea from Libya to Italy—a perilous trip that had led to many shipwrecks and thousands of deaths by drowning. Despite Italy's complaints that it was unable to handle the burden alone, other nations in the European Union had made it clear that they would take few, if any, of the refugees off Italy's hands, or even contribute much to an effort to rescue those endangered at sea. Germany and other members of the EU had stuck largely to the letter of the 1990 Dublin Regulation, which required the European nation in which a refugee first sets foot to take responsibility for his care and process his request for asylum.

The EU's passivity faced a greater challenge in early 2015, when refugees chose a shorter, safer, and cheaper route across the Aegean from Turkey to Greece. Bankrupt Greece was overwhelmed by the sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of people, and lacked the resources to accommodate them by the Dublin rules. Unlike their Italian counterparts, Greek officials allowed a ceaseless flood of people to cross the border toward more prosperous nations in the European Union—primarily, Germany and Scandinavia. The vast movement of humanity, as viv-

where they wanted to end up, I drew a range of answers: Holland, perhaps, or Sweden, Austria or the UK. Now almost everyone says they just want to reach Germany.

In principle, Germany had promised the right to asylum in its Basic Law, passed in 1949 in direct response to the Holocaust. In practice, however, the country has long maintained an ambivalent attitude toward outsiders. Hundreds of thousands of Turks, Portuguese, Moroccans, and others entered Germany through guest-worker programs in the 1950s and 1960s, but they were given very little language training and opportunities for citizenship. (It wasn't until 2000 that the Bundestag passed a law making the children of those guest workers, if they were born in Germany after 2000, automatically German citizens.) Chancellor Helmut Kohl once famously declared, “Germany is not a country of immigration.”

During the 1990s, faced with record numbers of refugees fleeing the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the Bundestag, fearful of social unrest, sharply restricted the number of those who could enter the country. The claims to asylum dropped from a high of more than 400,000 in 1992 to about 125,000 in 1994, and then to less than 50,000 by 2010. The rise of the Islamic State and the sharp escalation of the civil war in Syria led to an increase in the number of refugees permitted to enter Germany, especially in comparison with the rest of the EU. But the government proceeded with caution, wary of enflaming far-right political parties and movements such as Pegida—the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West—which was founded in Dresden in October 2014.

What accounted for Merkel's dramatic shift? In a report released in May by the Bertelsmann Foundation, *Germany's Response to the Refugee Situation: Remarkable Leadership or Fait Accompli?*, Matthias M. Mayer identifies two moments that strengthened Merkel's resolve to take action. In July 2015, a fourteen-year-old Palestinian refugee had confronted Merkel at a student gathering in Rostock, a city in northeast Germany, and told her of her fear that her claim for asylum might be rejected. Mayer writes:

Merkel stiffly explained that it was impossible for Germany to accept all refugees. The girl broke down in tears, the chancellor patted her on her shoulder in an awkward attempt at a comforting gesture, and a video of the interaction went viral. In late August, Merkel visited a refugee shelter in the town of Heidenau, in the eastern state of Saxony. Outside the shelter, a furious crowd of German residents assembled, shouting insults at Merkel—a level of public confrontation she had not previously experienced in her tenure as chancellor.

Merkel, who grew up in East Germany and joined the crowds that poured into West Berlin on the evening the Wall fell in November 1989,

also “perceived herself as a little bit of a refugee herself,” a Western diplomat told me; she felt a natural affinity for those forced to flee war, instability, and dictatorship. Germany had an obligation, she believed, because of both the burdens of its past and the abdication of responsibility by its European partners, to welcome the dispossessed and avoid a humanitarian catastrophe.

For the first few months of the refugee crisis, the term *Willkommenskultur*, or “welcoming culture,” was heard and seen often in the German media. The word referred to the generous reception of many refugees as they struggled to gain their footing in an unfamiliar country. One of those who tried to help was Andreas Tölke, a freelance journalist in Berlin, who was concerned about the long lines of desperate people standing outside the headquarters of LaGeSo, the Berlin agency responsible for finding them shelter and providing them with health care and other basic needs. “People had nowhere to go, the German bureaucracy was overwhelmed, so I starting calling friends, lining up places, and sending taxis to people’s homes with their guests,” he recalled.

Tölke put up a total of four hundred refugees in his apartment between July and October; at one point he had a family of fourteen from Afghanistan camped in his living room and a bedroom. He and fellow volunteers at the humanitarian organization he had founded, Be an Angel, also asked German employers—the hotel and restaurant union, the IT industry—to help in promoting jobs; they arranged for job applications and interviews for 1,400 refugees.

Tölke’s work has had some successes—he placed forty-five refugees in IT firms—but also setbacks. For a Syrian who had only a minimal education, and who had languished for months in an overcrowded camp in Spandau, he found a job cleaning toilets. “He was going to earn 1,400 euros cash a month, with health insurance,” Tölke told me. “He’d be able to support his family, move out of the camp, and learn German.” But the Bureau of Employment ultimately rejected the Syrian’s application, arguing that a native-born German could do the same job. “He is still in the camp. He lost his opportunity. That happens very often,” says Tölke.

Many local officials have taken action, as I found when I visited Hameln, a quiet town of 50,000 along the Weser River in the northwestern state of Lower Saxony. District leaders there were able to find housing quickly for the 1,100 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries who poured into the city last summer and fall. The refugees are distributed around Germany according to a quota system, known as the *Königsteiner Schlüssel*, named after a Frankfurt suburb where a formula for dividing the costs of national projects among German states was developed after World War II. “The number was far greater than anyone had expected,” I was told by Petra Broistedt, an adviser to the district of Hameln-Pyrmont, which consists of eight towns and municipalities, including the capital, Hameln.

A British military barracks that had been left empty when the troops returned to the United Kingdom in 2014 initially sheltered all of the refugees.

But unlike in Berlin, where thousands continue to languish in refugee camps, officials managed to clear out the barracks in about three months. In Oldendorf, near Hameln, a youth group took over the Hotel Catherinenhof, a deserted guesthouse that was struggling to find clients, and moved in eight unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan. “Some people in the community were opposed to it,” Broistedt told me. “So we called a meeting, showed a video, a refugee spoke about his life, and at the end, a German guy in his nineties stood up and said, ‘Enough of the arguments. They are good people, and we welcome them.’”

Hameln also organized a resettlement project that has become a model for other municipalities: the Englische Viertel, or English Quarter, a development that had housed British officers and their families until two years ago. Beginning last fall, the district leased or purchased many of the quarter’s sixty-one row houses, each with a small garden, from the government of Lower Saxony, and so far has moved in sixteen refugee families and two native German couples. Officials expect to provide housing here for another seventeen refugee families by the end of 2016, and to encourage, through rent subsidies, more native Germans and students to live among the foreigners. “We don’t want the place to become a refugee ghetto,” I was told by Karima Azouagh, a second-generation German of Moroccan ancestry who serves as the director of the Englische Viertel.

Germany’s *Willkommenskultur* became significantly less welcoming, however, after New Year’s Eve 2016. In a chaotic scene outside the central train station in the western German city of Cologne, gangs of young men, most of them North African and Middle Eastern, groped and sexually assaulted as many as one thousand women, while the police—heavily outnumbered and slow to comprehend the scale of the violence—did little to stop the mayhem. The New Year’s Eve attacks “blew the lid off the national conversation,” a Western diplomat in Berlin told me. “All the terrible nervousness, the German angst just rose to the surface. People were already fearful, and Cologne gave them license to express those fears.” According to the state prosecutor, “the overwhelming majority” of the men arrested had arrived in Germany as part of the 2015 wave of refugees. Coming in the aftermath of the November terrorist attacks in Paris (among the killers was at least one jihadist with a Syrian passport who had slipped into the country with many other refugees, apparently from Greece), the violence resulted in an anti-immigrant backlash.

Merkel’s popularity began to fall immediately after the assaults in Cologne. A feud spilled into the open between Merkel and Horst Seehofer, the minister president of Bavaria and leader of the Christian Social Union, the smaller, more conservative partner of Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Seehofer has threatened to sue the national government for failing to secure the country’s borders, and called for scaling back the number of refugees, blocking family reunifications, and quickly expelling those refugees who are not granted asylum.

The Cologne violence also resulted in more support for the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), a Eurocentric party formed in 2013 in opposition to the German-led bailout of Greece. The party now calls for keeping refugees out, banning the hijab, and outlawing circumcisions on religious grounds. In January 2016, the party’s leader and chief spokesperson, Frauke Petry, a Dresden-born chemist and entrepreneur, cited a German law stating that the border police may “use firearms if necessary” to “prevent illegal border crossings.” In the March 2016 elections, the AfD won seats in three state parliaments, including the wealthy western state of Baden-Württemberg; in the eastern state of Saxony Anhalt, it won nearly one quarter of the vote.

Petry told me that Germany should harbor Syrians and others “escaping from war” for the short term, but she insisted that they return home the moment the fighting stops. Most of the Syrians I spoke to told me that they would “never” go back. Petry maintains that because they lack education the vast majority of refugees will never be able to assimilate in German society. She envisioned a grim situation, in which there would be “one million people with no employment, dependent on social benefits,” with a huge birth rate, and still unable to speak German. The refugee influx, she added, also made Germany far more likely to become a target of terrorist attacks. “People who study the Koran [and] who are taught in Arabic tend to radicalize more than those who stay away from those texts,” she went on. The texts “teach violence, they teach intolerance toward other religions and sexual minorities. Trying to disconnect these problems from Islam would be dangerous.”

Cemile Giousouf, a member of the Bundestag from the CDU and the leader of the party’s refugee integration efforts, has accused Petry of inciting violence. “If Molotov cocktails fly today, then that is a product of your incendiary speech and your politics, Frau Petry,” she declared in a debate with the AfD leader that appeared in the mass circulation *Bild am Sonntag*. “If people are injured, then you will bear responsibility.”

Samuel Schidem, an Israeli Druze who runs IsraAID, a charity that works with unaccompanied minors in the state of Brandenburg, told me that xenophobic violence is on the rise, particularly in the former East Germany. Young refugees—most of them Afghans—in the seven shelters in which IsraAID works are regularly harassed and threatened by local people. “Stones are thrown at them every day, and attackers break the windows of their shelters,” he told me. “The kids don’t feel welcome. There is huge disappointment and growing anger.”

I heard about other such reactions. At the German class I attended in the Englische Viertel in Hameln, I asked Karima Azouagh, the director of the project, whether I could interview a student from Zimbabwe, but I was told that she was unwilling to talk to me. Weeks earlier, attackers had thrown Molotov cocktails into her apartment in a town near Hameln. She and her children had escaped the fire unharmed, and officials had hastily arranged the family’s transfer to the Englische Viertel. “She is undergoing therapy,” Azouagh told me. “She is traumatized.”

Last winter it became clear that Germany's open-door policy toward refugees could not be sustained. Merkel's popularity continued to fall—only 33 percent of respondents said they would vote for her CDU in the next election, according to a poll taken in March—while the AfD was on the rise. In the rest of the European Union and the Balkans governments were refusing entry to refugees, trapping tens of thousands in squalid camps in Greece and raising anew the specter of a humanitarian catastrophe.

In March, Merkel reached a deal on behalf of the European Union with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu that seemed to provide a temporary solution. Greece would deport back to Turkey thousands of refugees languishing in its camps. In exchange, Turkey would fly an equal number of Syrian refugees to various agreed-on destinations in different parts of Europe. Turkey would then seal its borders and not allow any more refugees to leave. In return it would receive a \$6.7 billion aid package to help it cope with the three million refugees in Turkey. Turkish citizens would be allowed visa-free stays in the EU for six months, a concession contingent on Ankara's rewriting its anti-terrorism statutes, which have been used increasingly to prosecute journalists and other government critics.

Some of Merkel's fellow European leaders complained that she hadn't consulted them in making the deal. But the new arrangement emptied Greece's camps in weeks and eased the crisis. For his part Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the thin-skinned and increasingly au-

tocratic Turkish president, has threatened many times to open his country's borders again and send a new wave of refugees into Europe. Merkel has found herself in an awkward position, wishing neither to placate a dictator nor see the agreement scuttled. In April, she was harshly criticized for allowing Erdoğan to pursue a case in German court against Jan Böhmermann, a German satirist who had mocked him on national television. (She later said the law allowing the case should be abolished.) In June, she was viciously attacked by the pro-Erdoğan press in Turkey after the Bundestag overwhelmingly approved a long-delayed resolution that labeled the deaths in 1915 of more than a million Armenians "genocide." Cem Özdamir, the leader of Germany's Green Party, who was instrumental in pushing through the resolution, told me that he had considered it vital to proceed with the vote, regardless of the repercussions. He doubted that the resolution would scuttle the agreement; Erdoğan, he said, needed it as much as the European Union.

Whether or not the Turkey deal survives, the refugee flood is unlikely to end for a long time. During the last weeks many thousands have crossed the Mediterranean to Italy from Libya, and at least one thousand drowned in a single week in late May and early June. And at least 500,000 family members of Syrian refugees in Germany are awaiting reunification with their families. In early June Germany tightened regulations on family reunifications, extending the waiting time in many cases from one to three years. In the conclusion of the Bertelsmann Founda-

tion report, Matthias Mayer writes that "without a concerted European solution" in which the EU states will share the burden, "chaotic migrant flows and human rights violations will follow."

Such a solution was proposed by George Soros in a speech to the European Parliament in Brussels on June 30 and in other statements. He laid out a plan by which the EU countries would, among other measures, draw on their highly rated credit facilities not only to finance better conditions for asylum seekers across Europe, but also to make substantial contributions to support Middle Eastern countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, which now act as hosts to millions of refugees. If basic conditions for their housing, medical facilities, child care, education, and employment could be improved in those host countries, this could have a major effect on the refugee problem in Germany and the other EU countries.

Whatever the prospects of such a plan, Germany will still have to deal with the refugees it has already admitted. Those close to Merkel say that she views with alarm the failures of France and Belgium to assimilate their North African and Arab populations, and the creation of urban ghettos like Molenbeek near Brussels that serve as incubators for radical Islam. "Merkel doesn't want a multicultural Germany—a country with many parallel worlds," one of her closest advisers told me. "She wants a single Germany."

Özdamir, the son of Turkish guest workers who settled in Germany in the 1960s, told me that Germany's experience with its *Gastarbeiter* (guest-

worker) program, mainly for Turkish workers, should now be seen as cautionary. "I won't call it a failure," he told me, referring to his own rise to the top of the German political leadership. But it was also clear that lack of government support for those early Turkish immigrants had slowed or prevented their absorption into German society. The most important lesson of the *Gastarbeiter* program, he said, was the need to provide "immediate access to the job market, immediate training on language... [and] a path to citizenship."

Kipp, the spokesperson for the Tamaja organization at Tempelhof, told me that the refusal of the government to provide German-language courses for Afghans—though nearly 50 percent of them will be granted political asylum—was condemning many of them to isolation and joblessness. "It is a real failure," she told me. Samuel Schidem of IsraAID has criticized much the same short-term thinking in the state of Brandenburg, where the government has refused to provide much support to unaccompanied Afghan minors, reasoning that many will eventually be deported. "The kids are rotting away in the middle of nowhere, getting no language training, no volunteers, no social programs," he told me. "The kids could easily fall victim to the Salafists." Germany's early welcome and rapid mobilization on behalf of the refugees set it apart from the rest of the European Union. Unless the country can address the flaws and inequalities in its current system, it may create the very ghettos that Merkel is so desperate to avoid. □