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German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared at an Oct. 16 meeting of young members of her party, the Christian Democratic Union, that multiculturalism, or Multikulti, as the Germans put it, “has failed totally.” Horst Seehofer, minister-president of Bavaria and the chairman of a sister party to the Christian Democrats, said at the same meeting that the two parties were “committed to a dominant German culture and opposed to a multicultural one.” Merkel also said that the flood of immigrants is [holding back the German economy](#), although Germany does need more highly trained specialists, as opposed to the laborers who have sought economic advantages in Germany.

The statements were striking in their bluntness and their willingness to speak of a dominant German culture, a concept that for obvious reasons Germans have been sensitive about asserting since World War II. The statement should be taken with utmost seriousness and considered for its social and geopolitical implications. It should also be considered in the broader context of Europe’s response to immigration, not to Germany’s response alone.

The Origins of the German Immigration Question

Let’s begin with the origins of the problem. Post-World War II Germany faced a severe labor shortage for two reasons: a labor pool depleted by the devastating war — and by Soviet prisoner-of-war camps — and the economic miracle that began on the back of revived industry in the 1950s. Initially, Germany was able to compensate by admitting ethnic Germans fleeing Central Europe and Communist East Germany. But the influx only helped assuage the population loss from World War II. Germany needed more labor to feed its burgeoning export-based industry, and in particular more unskilled laborers for manufacturing, construction and other industries.

To resolve the continuing labor shortage, Germany turned to a series of successive labor recruitment deals, first with Italy (1955). After labor from Italy dried up due to Italy’s own burgeoning economy, Germany turned to Spain (1960), Greece (1960), Turkey (1961) and then Yugoslavia (1968). Labor recruitment led to a massive influx of “Gastarbeiter,” German for

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“guest workers,” into German society. The Germans did not see this as something that would change German society: They regarded the migrants as temporary labor, not as immigrants in any sense. As the term implied, the workers were guests and would return to their countries of origin when they were no longer needed (many Spaniards, Italians and Portuguese did just this). This did not particularly trouble the Germans, who were primarily interested in labor.

The Germans simply didn't expect this to be a long-term issue. They did not consider how to assimilate these migrants, a topic that rarely came up in policy discussions. Meanwhile, the presence of migrant labor allowed millions of Germans to move from unskilled labor to white-collar jobs during the 1960s.

An economic slowdown in 1966 and full-on recession following the oil shock of 1973 changed labor conditions in Germany. Germany no longer needed a steady stream of unskilled labor and actually found itself facing mounting unemployment among migrants already in country, leading to the “Anwerbestopp,” German for “labor recruitment stop,” in 1973.

Nonetheless, the halt in migration did not resolve the fact that guest workers already were in Germany in great numbers, migrants who now wanted to bring in family members. The 1970s saw most migration switch to “family reunions” and, when the German government moved to close that loophole, asylum. As the Italians, Spanish and Portuguese returned home to tend to their countries' own successive economic miracles, Muslim Turks became the overwhelming majority of migrants in Germany — particularly as asylum seekers flocked into Germany, most of whom were not fleeing any real government retribution. It did not help that Germany had particularly open asylum laws in large part due to guilt over the Holocaust, a loophole [Turkish migrants](#) exploited en masse following the 1980 coup d'etat in Turkey.

As the migrants transformed from a temporary exigency to a multigenerational community, the Germans had to confront the problem. At base, they did not want the migrants to become part of Germany. But if they were to remain in the country, Berlin wanted to make sure the migrants became loyal to Germany. The onus on assimilating migrants into the larger society increased as Muslim discontent rocked Europe in the 1980s. The solution Germans finally agreed upon in the mid-to-late 1980s was multiculturalism, a liberal and humane concept that offered migrants a grand bargain: Retain your culture but pledge loyalty to the state.

In this concept, Turkish immigrants, for example, would not be expected to assimilate into

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German culture. Rather, they would retain their own culture, including language and religion, and that culture would coexist with German culture. Thus, there would be a large number of foreigners, many of whom could not speak German and by definition did not share German and European values.

While respecting diversity, the policy seemed to amount to buying migrant loyalty. The deeper explanation was that the Germans did not want, and did not know how, to assimilate culturally, linguistically, religiously and morally diverse people. Multiculturalism did not so much represent respect for diversity as much as a way to escape the question of what it meant to be German and what pathways foreigners would follow to become Germans.

Two Notions of Nation

This goes back to the European notion of the nation, which is substantially different from the American notion. For most of its history, the United States thought of itself as a nation of immigrants, but with a core culture that immigrants would have to accept in a well-known multicultural process. Anyone could become an American, so long as they accepted the language and dominant culture of the nation. This left a lot of room for uniqueness, but some values had to be shared. [Citizenship](#) became a legal concept. It required a process, an oath and shared values. Nationality could be acquired; it had a price.

To be French, Polish or Greek meant not only that you learned their respective language or adopted their values — it meant that you were French, Polish or Greek because your parents were, as were their parents. It meant a shared history of suffering and triumph. One couldn't acquire that.

For the Europeans, multiculturalism was not the liberal and humane respect for other cultures that it pretended to be. It was a way to deal with the reality that a large pool of migrants had been invited as workers into the country. The offer of multiculturalism was a grand bargain meant to lock in migrant loyalty in exchange for allowing them to keep their culture — and to protect European culture from foreign influences by sequestering the immigrants. The Germans tried to have their workers and a German identity simultaneously. It didn't work.

Multiculturalism resulted in the permanent alienation of the immigrants. Having been told to

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keep their own identity, they did not have a shared interest in the fate of Germany. They identified with the country they came from much more than with Germany. Turkey was home. Germany was a convenience. It followed that their primary loyalty was to their home and not to Germany. The idea that a commitment to one's homeland culture was compatible with a political loyalty to the nation one lived in was simplistic. Things don't work that way. As a result, Germany did not simply have an alien mass in its midst: Given the state of affairs between the Islamic world and the West, at least some [Muslim immigrants were engaged in potential terrorism](#)

Multiculturalism is profoundly divisive, particularly in countries that define the nation in European terms, e.g., through nationality. What is fascinating is that the German chancellor has chosen to become the most aggressive major European leader to speak out against multiculturalism. Her reasons, political and social, are obvious. But it must also be remembered that this is Germany, which previously addressed the problem of the German nation via the Holocaust. In the 65 years since the end of World War II, the Germans have been extraordinarily careful to avoid discussions of this issue, and German leaders have not wanted to say things such as being committed to a dominant German culture. We therefore need to look at the failure of multiculturalism in Germany in another sense, namely, with regard to what is happening in Germany.

Simply put, Germany is returning to history. It has spent the past 65 years desperately trying not to confront the question of national identity, the rights of minorities in Germany and the exercise of German self-interest. The Germans have embedded themselves in multinational groupings like the European Union and NATO to try to avoid a discussion of a simple and profound concept: nationalism. Given what they did last time the matter came up, they are to be congratulated for their exercise of decent silence. But that silence is now over.

The Re-emergence of German Nation Awareness

Two things have forced the re-emergence of German national awareness. The first, of course, is the immediate issue — a large and indigestible mass of Turkish and other Muslim workers. The second is the state of the multinational organizations to which Germany tried to confine itself. [NATO](#), a military alliance consisting mainly of countries lacking [militaries worth noting](#), is moribund. The second is the state of the European Union. After the [Greek and related economic crises](#), the certainties about a united Europe have frayed. Germany now sees itself as shaping EU institutions so as not to be forced into being the European Union's ultimate financial guarantor. And this compels Germany to think about Germany beyond its relations with Europe.

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It is impossible for Germany to reconsider its position on multiculturalism without, at the same time, validating the principle of the German nation. Once the principle of the nation exists, so does the idea of a national interest. Once the national interest exists, Germany exists in the context of the European Union only as what Goethe termed an “elective affinity.” What was a certainty amid the Cold War now becomes an option. And if Europe becomes an option for Germany, then not only has Germany re-entered history, but given that Germany is the leading European power, the history of Europe begins anew again.

This isn't to say that Germany must follow any particular foreign policy given its new official view on multiculturalism; it can choose many paths. But an attack on multiculturalism is simultaneously an affirmation of German national identity. You can't have the first without the second. And once that happens, many things become possible.

Consider that Merkel made clear that Germany needed 400,000 trained specialists. Consider also that Germany badly needs workers of all sorts who are not Muslims living in Germany, particularly in view of Germany's demographic problems. If Germany can't import workers for social reasons, it can export factories, call centers, medical analysis and IT support desks. Not far to the east is [Russia, which has a demographic crisis](#) of its own but nonetheless has spare labor capacity due to its reliance on purely extractive natural resources for its economy. Germany already depends on Russian energy. If it comes to rely on Russian workers, and in turn [Russia comes to rely on German investment](#), then the map of Europe could be redrawn once again and European history restarted at an even greater pace.

Merkel's statement is therefore of enormous importance on two levels. First, she has said aloud what many leaders already know, which is that multiculturalism can become a national catastrophe. Second, in stating this, she sets in motion other processes that could have a profound impact on not only [Germany and Europe](#) but also the global balance of power. It is not clear at this time what her intention is, which may well be to boost her center-right coalition government's abysmal popularity. But the process that has begun is neither easily contained nor neatly managed. All of Europe, indeed, much of the world, is coping with the struggle between cultures within their borders. But the Germans are different, historically and geographically. When they begin thinking these thoughts, the stakes go up.

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