



**Book Review — *We Are All Migrants: A History of Multicultural Germany*, by Jan Plamper.**

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The movement of people across international and domestic borders is a heated recurring topic of dialogue that shapes political debates, cultural identities, and personal narratives across the globe. The history of migration is both long and deeply interwoven with questions of belonging and survival, making it essential in understanding how societies have been formed and reshaped over time and into the modern day. German migration, in particular, has fascinating roots tangled in power and identity, revealing how factors such as cultural belonging, shifting borders, and drastic changes in politics have shaped the nation's history and national identity. In his translated monograph, *We Are All Migrants: A History of Multicultural Germany* (2023), the late German historian Jan Plamper explores Germany's complex, often dark, migrant history, showing how migration has repeatedly reshaped the country and its national identity. Plamper is successful in demonstrating various phases of German migration, specifically throughout the mid-to late twentieth century, primarily from 1945–1989. *We Are All Migrants* carefully, yet successfully, integrates forgotten and unheard accounts from oral histories that tells the stories of various individuals, giving voice to experiences that illuminate the broader social and political transformations of modern Germany.

*We Are Migrants* is broken into two sections. Plamper begins his analysis by briefly examining the history of emigration from Germany in the first chapter, establishing the broader evolution of belonging and identity. German migrants carried their culture widely across the globe. For instance, Plamper's discussion of "parallel societies" highlights how Germans, along with their belongings, skilled labour, and families, blended their culture into new homelands while simultaneously negotiating the

tensions between integration and the preservation of distinct German identities (p. 11). From the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century, mass waves of emigration flowed into South America, the United States, and Russia. Here, Plamper employs personal narratives to illustrate the gradual integration of German cultural practices—such as the introduction of kindergarten into American society in the nineteenth century. Yet emigration from Germany did not unfold without prejudice. In 1918, for example, a mob of 300 men stormed a jail in Collinsville, Illinois, dragged German-American Robert Prager from his cell, wrapped him in an American flag, and hanged him outside the city after accusations that he had made “[...] disloyal utterances against the United States and President Wilson” (p. 23). Such gruesome depictions of ethnic Germans being brutally murdered, mocked, and humiliated in both the United States and Russia during the early twentieth century exemplify the fragility of migrant belonging and reveal the violent limits of cultural acceptance within host societies.

Throughout the first part of his book, Plamper examines the expulsions of Germans from territories of the Third Reich in addition to ethnic German minorities from Eastern Europe after 1945. Here, his work resembles that of European transnational historian Tara Zahra, particularly her book titled, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe* (2017), as Plamper examines migration not simply as movement across borders, but as a lens through which to understand contested notions of belonging, much like Zahra’s analysis of Eastern European departures. Throughout the four chapters of the first section—‘Twelve-and-a-Half Million in Six Years’, ‘Labor Migration to West Germany’, ‘Labor Migration to East Germany’, and ‘Asylum’—Plamper successfully traces the long-term consequences of Nazi-era displacement, emphasising how it not only uprooted millions but also fostered enduring resentment and hostility among Eastern European populations. In addition, he tactically distinguishes between legal frameworks, asylum, and various forms of migration within the European context, offering a layered analysis of migration in two German worlds, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, i.e. West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR, i.e. East Germany). The emphasis on labour migrants in Germany, especially within the GDR, throughout the twentieth century sheds light on the issue of respect. Social stigmas, accusations from

far-right groups like the AfD (Alternative for Germany), marginalisation, and underpayments still plague the country. Many labour migrants are “[...] often forced to live on the margins of society instead of being able to profit from their labour migration” (p. 105). Taken together, Plamper shows that the experiences of labour migrants in both German states cannot be separated from longer histories of displacement and exclusion, and he makes clear that the social and political tensions born out of these migrations continue to shape debates over belonging and inequality in Germany.

The second half of *We Are Migrants* is split into three chapters: ‘Germans There, Russians Here’, ‘Jewish Germaniya’, and ‘Welcoming Culture’. Each of these chapters spotlight current (1989–2023) migrants who experience the difficulties of living between cultures, negotiating differences of daily life such as a language and religion. In census data, according to Plamper, many of these groups are not formally accounted for as “migrants”. Labour migrants from places such as Italy and Turkey, Jewish “Quota Refugees” from the Soviet Union, and ethnic Germans from the USSR and Eastern Europe who began emigration around the time of Perestroika underwent processes of marginalisation and partial exclusion, as their legal status or ethnic background often obscured the reality that their daily lives were marked by displacement, adaptation, and the constant negotiation of belonging in Germany (p. 210). The latter half of the book shows how these unaccounted groups complicate easy definitions of who counts as migrants and reminds readers that belonging in Germany has always been contested and uneven. Much of this tension grows out of Germany’s colonial past, particularly the ways the colonial economy “[...] contributed to the accumulation of German wealth during the German colonial era dating from 1884 until 1919” (p. 216). By linking the struggles of contemporary migrants to the legacies of colonial wealth and exploitation, Plamper shows that exclusion in modern Germany is inseparable from its longer imperial history. In doing so, the latter half of the book urges readers to view migration not as a break from German history, but as central to its continuing debates over identity and belonging.

The spread of both political violence and scare tactics of immigrants by political authorities only furthers the fundamental truth of Plamper’s book: culture is shaped by diaspora, inclusivity, and most fundamentally, the

human experience. *We Are Migrants* is triumphant in displaying the humanistic elements to migration, which is historically glossed over, that is necessary to understand the difficult and oftentimes harsh realities that millions face all over the world. By incorporating first-hand and oral accounts, Plamper reveals how migration unfolded in multiple phases across Germany and its surroundings, especially throughout the twentieth century. Plamper reminds readers that migration is not just a series of policies or statistics, but a deeply human story. His work challenges us to see migrants not as abstract numbers, but as individuals whose experiences continue to shape culture and society in profound ways.

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