

Immigration, Naturalization, and the Turkish-German Identity: Regional Variation of Citizenship Tests and Social Identity in the Immigration Experience

Rebecca K. Manseau

Departments of Political Science and German, Sewanee: The University of the South

Introduction

While the movement of people between states often sparks a protective reaction on the part of the receiving state, Germany's once significantly strict immigration policy has experienced a series of liberalizations in its reception of foreign persons in the past twenty years. With the introduction of the naturalization tests in 2008, some have argued that the tests were a measure to stem the flow of naturalized residents in the face of international pressures to liberalize immigration standards (Howard, 2009, p. 138). Further, attitudes toward immigration retain a "distinctive backlash" (Howard, 2009) in that the term "Ausländer quite often has been used as a politically more correct gloss for the obvious but unstated *Turkish* referent" (Mandel, 2008, p. 31). The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the naturalization tests and how they are differentiated among the German states. This research also examines the difficulty level of the language on these tests and the attitudes of Turkish immigrants towards the tests. The research investigates the original motivation for immigration and how the immigrants

react toward the naturalization tests, seeking to understand the social makeup that constitutes personal perspectives in motivations for immigration as well as the immigration experience. This study draws from interviews in order to gather information about immigrants' experience with the German naturalization tests.

“Wir sind kein Einwanderungsland.”

“[Germany is] not an immigration country.”

--Helmut Kohl, 1992, Chancellor of Germany 1982-1998

Immigration and naturalization are two concepts that invariably deal with the deepest aspects of a person's identity. A person leaves his or her home state for many reasons, some personal, political, or economically driven. Upon immigrating to a new state, the person must complete paperwork and usually a test in order to apply for citizenship. The immigrant immerses him- or herself into an entirely new culture on a permanent basis. The person is completely foreign in his or her new surroundings, even down to the most essential factors, including language.

The fundamental question that this research seeks to answer is: how do the naturalization tests differ among regions of Germany, and to what extent, if any, does the difficulty of the language on these tests play an exclusionary role in the incorporation of Turkish naturalized immigrants?

A Glance at Immigration to Germany since 1956

From 1956 until 1973, Germany instituted the *Gastarbeiter*, or guest-worker, programs to fill a need for labor in the economic boom of the late 1950s known as the *Wirtschaftswunder*. These programs introduced Italian, Greek, Portuguese, and Turkish workers into industrial labor factories, and many of them, upon the conclusion of the programs, decided to stay in Germany. There, an immigrant community developed, especially that of Turkish people. In 1996, Berlin had the third largest Turkish population in the world (Senders, 1996: 152). Numbers of naturalized immigrants were up to 186,688 in 2000, but showed a decrease in 2006 to 124,566 naturalized immigrants (BBC). However, prior to the liberalization of Germany's immigration policies in 2000, Germany only observed nationality based upon the idea of *jus sanguinis*, or citizenship by blood as well as those of Jewish descent (von Stritzky, 2009).

Today, any person can apply for citizenship in Germany. However, Germany requires a seven year time period in which the applicant for citizenship holds a job and demonstrates economic self-sufficiency, not relying solely on Germany's social welfare system.

The Naturalization Tests

When interviewed, research participants were asked if they had taken the naturalization test yet, and if so, where they had taken it. Research participants were

then further asked to describe their reaction to and opinion of the naturalization test, as well as whether they found the term “Ausländer” to be of an exclusionary nature.

One research participant explained in an interview:

“310 questions that you should work for--study for. But in the exam, 33 questions are chosen by chance...you should know the answers of 17 questions in order to get citizenship. But I was working in the market and studying for these 310 questions and asking these questions to the customers--German customers--and even those German customers were not able to answer to these questions. 1 in 10 questions was correct. It was really hard. Really hard grammar.”

The difficulty of the questions varies--questions range from how the governmental system functions to very detailed questions such as who was the author of the national anthem--and clearly varies between personal opinions. For example, another research participant said that the questions were “all fairly equal” and did not find the test to be difficult. As there were a wide range of opinions across the spectrum on the difficulty of the tests, the next aspect of the research was to determine in what ways these tests differed between the sixteen states of Germany. Websites such as deutsch-werden.de offer accessibility to the 310 questions and also offer specialized practice tests for each of the sixteen states. The way in which the tests differ lies in a few questions that are tailored to the individual states. For example, a question that would apply only to Berlin would ask what colors make up the representative flag. Further contact with the website developer for deutsch-werden.de revealed that out of 32,449 completed

practice tests since the website's creation in 2008, 31,486 passed at an average age of 36.26.

It is interesting to note that the same research participant who considered the naturalization test questions to be "fairly equal" also found the term "Ausländer" to be more exclusionary, while the first participant who found the test to be difficult found no negative connotation with the term, which translates literally as "outlander." Other responses mirrored this pattern, one participant even comparing it to the "n-word" of American English and another offering what he felt was a more neutral term: "Bürger mit Migrationshintergrund," or citizen with immigration background. This pattern indicates a certain awareness and consciousness of connotations within language that comes with a greater familiarity of the language itself. German is generally acknowledged to be a difficult language to learn, especially its grammatical structure, as the quote in the previous paragraph acknowledges. However, research participants who had completed some level of education in Germany--and thus had greater contact with the language--found that the naturalization tests were easier. At the same time, people with lower-level service jobs and implicitly a lower level of contact with the language had a difficult time with the naturalization tests and thought that the word "Ausländer" had neither a positive nor a negative connotation.

Motivations for Immigration

In order to understand people's reactions to the naturalization tests, it also proved valuable to inquire as to the reason why people immigrated. Previous research conducted by this author showed that motivations for immigration were largely economically based. As previously discussed, in the late 1950s to early 1970s, the *Gastarbeiter*, or "guest-worker" programs were instituted in Germany in order to increase economic productivity. These programs saw the introduction of Turkish, Italian, Greek, Spanish, and North African workers in industry-related jobs; however, many of these workers built lives in Germany and had brought their wives and children to live with them there. They did not wish to return to their own countries, where there were fewer economic opportunities. In the findings of this research, interview participants did affirm the economic motivation, but they also voiced other reasons which were previously unanticipated. These reasons included multiple politically-based facets. One of the main perspectives which interview participants represented was the Kurdish population of Turkey. This population of the research study wished to be acknowledged and identified as Kurdish German, rather than Turkish German. Such requests indicate a motivation to immigrate that is more based upon identity and political issues rather than simply economic motivations. The current conservative political situation in Turkey also contributed to some participants' desire to immigrate to Germany, as well as the desire to circumvent compulsory military service.

The Kurdish Element

The element of Kurdish people in this study was previously unanticipated; however, the people who identified themselves as Kurdish provided an opportunity to deepen the scope of this research. Although these research participants identified themselves as Kurdish, rather than Turkish, each one originated from the state of Turkey prior to immigrating to Germany and thus represented another social group that broadened the range of perspectives in this research.

Background

Here I will briefly discuss the Kurdish history in Turkey and the Kurdish people's desire for their own independent state, which inevitably leads to social and political conflict and allows for a partial explanation on the political impulse to emigrate from Turkey to Germany. However, "Middle Eastern history has all too often been written by its hegemony" (Izady, 1992, p. 23) and, as stated by Houston, the "production of knowledge about Kurds by Kurds themselves...is sometimes transmitted to Western circuits via academics and students at Western universities, with their own biases and limitations" (2010, p. 69). Here, this research draws upon published information, but will also include the perspectives of the self-identified Kurdish people who participated in interviews. In the twentieth century, the "weakening of the Ottoman Empire by World War I, and the spread of the idea of self-

determination proclaimed by both the Bolshevik revolution (Lenin) and American liberalism (President Wilson)...led to the emergence of the first demands for Kurdish independence” (Halliday, 2006, p. 15). The relationship between the Kurds and Turks has been based off of a conflict rooted in nationalism and the desire for the recognition of a Kurdish state. Further, the representation of Kurdish history and culture has been repressed in Turkey. Following a Kurdish uprising in 1923, Turkey enacted measures to silence opposition, such as changing Kurdish village names to Turkish variants and “the word Kurdistan--until then used to denote a geographical region--was expunged from books and the language itself was essentially banned” (Marcus, 2007, p. 18). Kurdish nationalism grew in spite of measures implemented by the Turkish state to educate and assimilate Kurds as identifying as Turkish. As a result, uprisings continued and were suppressed by Turkish military means and then in 1978, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or the *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK) was officially formed (Marcus, 2007, p. 46). This organization was the strongest political organization of an otherwise fragmented social group and thus was seen as giving voice and opportunity to the call for Kurdish independence. The leader, Abdullah Ocalan, had been gathering support through social connections for years prior to the party’s formal beginnings. A supporter of the PKK stated: “After years of being repressed, suddenly there was something and everyone ran to the PKK” (Ulek, qtd. by Marcus, 2007, p. 45).

The PKK was able in large part to mobilize in the late 1970s due to political unrest in Turkey. Ocalan incorporated socialist theories learned at his years of

university in Ankara with a call for Kurdish liberation that gathered support in the southeastern part of Turkey, where a large portion of the Kurdish population was concentrated. The organization functioned and spread through supporting members' recruitment in their home regions, and also eventually spread to Europe. Marcus notes that

“Europe was [in 1981] home to some two million so-called guestworkers from Turkey, more than half of whom lived in Germany, and as such was seen by militant groups a good place to try and win new supporters and financial donations. Europe also was an attractive place for activists forced into exile, and tens of thousands came after the [military coup] in Turkey” (2007, p. 66).

With the establishment of military takeover and martial law on September 12, 1980 (Marcus, 2007, p. 50), the PKK sought to move its base from Turkey to avoid arrest and, as was often the case, torture of its members. In the early 1990s, the PKK reached the peak of its power in the resistance movement against the Turkish state, but efforts still continue.

It is important, however, to note that the PKK today is considered a terrorist organization by the United States, Turkey, and much of Europe (Marcus, 2007, p. vii). This stems from the way in which the PKK chose to attract attention, which often included political killings in the early days of the party's existence. Later, in 1991 and 1992, the PKK implemented guerilla warfare to combat Turkey's military efforts to control the southeast region. For example, “After dark, the PKK set up checkpoints on main roads and checked identity cards. Kurds were subjected to nationalist lectures;

state workers and security personnel were pulled from their vehicles and often shot...At the same time, the rebels challenged the military's defenses by raiding urban centers and shooting up state buildings and police stations" (Marcus, 2007, p. 169). In 1993, the PKK kidnapped twenty tourists for not having a PKK visa and "the year before, three Turkish engineers from the international oil giant Mobil Oil were executed by the PKK" (Marcus, 2007, p. 218). In 1994, conflicts increased and rebels "bombed Istanbul's Tuzla train station, killing five military students and wounding 31 others" (Marcus, 2007, p. 226). Actions for publicity extended to planned attacks on Turkish businesses and consulates within Europe (Marcus, 2007, p. 233). After the capture of the leader Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK lost some of its unity and direction; however, the organization is still in existence today.

Kurdish Perspectives Today

The Kurdish participants who agreed to make interviews came from a variety of backgrounds, but they all were very clear on one matter: although they had previously lived in the geographical area that is defined as the state of Turkey, they were entirely Kurdish. Upon agreeing to an interview, one research participant stated: "I will answer your questions, but please remember I will answer as a Kurdish German." This is a clear demonstration of personal identity that transcends to a nationalistic identity as well. When interviewing, research participants were asked if they described themselves as German or Turkish-German. Kurdish participants responded with mixed reactions:

“I feel Kurdish. I tried so hard psychologically to feel like German, but couldn’t achieve it. I am really owed to the nation of Germany because they welcomed me really respectfully, but...I couldn’t achieve to be German, because we [Kurdish] have some different aspects than Germany..because some of us still want it [Kurdistan] and Germany still considers the PKK as terrorist organization. This is the reason why I can not be a German..because there is still some struggle between being a German and being a Kurdish [person]. Unless the politics of Germany changes, I can never be a German. I can never feel like a German citizen.”

The strong nationalistic ties are closely aligned with allegiance to the PKK. One research participant who had been a member of the PKK stated:

“Abdullah Ocalan...the leader of PKK is like George Washington for us...like George Washington for the USA. If we defend Abdullah Ocalan here [in Germany] it is against the constitution of Germany because he is like a terrorist leader. So how can we [the Kurdish people] be German?”

Multiple Kurdish German research participants had had ties with the PKK and had to flee Turkey in order to avoid arrest or further imprisonment. One former PKK member who worked as a journalist told the story of his journey to Germany, where he declared asylum after having faced torture in Turkish prison:

“I went to jail and faced tortures. Methods like electric shock and hanging my hand on the wall and hitting chest... and inhuman[e] tortures, let’s say. And verbal tortures...in 1998 I decided to be a refugee and not face tortures in prison again. I went to Romania...I was always working as a journalist. Some of my friends were sent back

to Turkey and I was captured once. My son was five years old and did not want to let me go. When the police officer saw him, the police officer was so influenced that he said, 'I will not send you back to Turkey. Turkey gave us a list of your name and your friends' names and we should send you back but I do not want to. I will give you permission for one week to leave this country.' I then traveled on foot with my son and my wife to Germany and declared myself a refugee."

It is valuable to note that not all Kurdish people who participated in the interviews identified with the PKK. In fact, several Kurdish people who were interviewed had experienced difficulties with the immigration process because they were suspected of having ties to the PKK simply because they were Kurdish. One Kurdish person who claimed no connection to the PKK remarked on the struggle for Kurdish people in Turkey, "There is no real alternative to the PKK, but the PKK is not clean and there is no option for peaceful resistance."

However, the issue of identity as a German with Kurdish or Turkish ties is more complex than simply being German. A Kurdish research participant stated that he had family members that worked in the Turkish police force and military, and that he himself still feels like a citizen of Turkey despite having been tortured.

Methods

During my fieldwork in Berlin, I recorded my research through the medium of verbal interviews, surveys, and detailed field notes. Prior to conducting my research, I

had planned to record the interviews by means of my audio recorder and then transcribe my interviews into a formalized, detailed document. This, however, was complicated by technological problems. My audio recorder erased some of my initial interviews, and intermittently throughout my stay and especially in the last week and a half of my research period I did not have consistent access to the Internet, which interfered with my ability to record information because I work through Google documents. The things that could have gone wrong naturally did so; nevertheless, field notes and journaling never failed me. Furthermore, the method of field-note-taking allowed me to spend more time developing a genuine connection with the people, which allowed me to hear their personal stories of immigration experiences and integration into German society. The interviews were quite in-depth as well, often lasting up to several hours, according to the personal histories and details which the people wished to share, which made surveys and field notes the most practical method available to use. I had originally anticipated making the interviews long enough for a duration of ten to fifteen minutes. In the field, I found that an unhurried atmosphere accompanied many of the meetings that I had with research participants, which led to a longer interview duration but also more detailed and in-depth responses to my interview questions.

In my first weeks of research, I strove to make as many research contacts as possible. This proved complicated, as the research timeline coincided directly with the end of academic semesters for the university venues that I had planned to use as well as the height of vacation season. With the German vacation season, it is typical for

people to take vacations that last up to six weeks, often in the months of July or August. Business owners will even temporarily close down their shops to take a vacation, and it is common for Turkish people to be employed in these types of service-level jobs, which ultimately closed off opportunities for me that I had not previously anticipated. This caused me to have to amend my original plan for interviewing, but also gave me time to investigate details about the naturalization tests that would not necessarily be clarified through a question and answer format in an interview. I also conducted and established interview contacts at the Deutsch in Deutschland Institute, a private language-instruction school designed for people of all ages and all nationalities who wish to learn German.

In my second and third weeks of research, I sought interviews from people on the streets. I mainly worked through connections from my original interview sources, but I also visited many of Berlin's "Spätkauf" stores, or beverage stores that stay open late into the night, where there were usually Turkish workers who were willing to spend a few minutes of their time answering questions about their experience of immigrating to Germany and of taking the naturalization test.

My fourth, fifth, and sixth weeks covered more in-depth research in the form of interviews. It was at this point in time that I utilized the open forum discussion board of couchsurfing.org to reach out to the greater part of the Berlin Turkish community. Although I was initially unsure of the type of responses I would receive, the response pool diversified the age range, education level, and place of origin from which research

participants came within Turkey to a much greater extent than the initial weeks of interviewing yielded.

The seventh and final week of the Biehl Fellowship was spent continuing interviews. I concluded my interviews and finished my field notes. I also began to draw conclusions from the interviews and included these in my journaling until the end of my time in Berlin.

Conclusions

Although the naturalization tests differ among the German states, the difference lies within a small portion of questions on the naturalization test. A relationship arose between participants' familiarity with the German language and their varying degrees of perceived difficulty of the naturalization tests. Further, research participants' language familiarity seemed to indicate a deeper consciousness of how the word "Ausländer" can communicate a negative connotation.

The concept of identity also played a significant role in this study. The wide array of perspectives ranged from that of former members of the PKK to economically motivated immigrants to people evading Turkey's compulsory military participation as well as the newly conservative attitude of the Turkish government. These backgrounds constituted varying definitions of what it is to be a naturalized German citizen with origins in Turkey. While many acknowledged the difficulties of assimilating into an

entirely new culture, the viewpoint expressed most often was that their experience as an immigrant meant being German while retaining Turkish or Kurdish roots.

Reflections from the Field

Prior to traveling to Germany, the things I knew about the Turkish culture and political system were rather limited in scope. The evening of my first interview gave me a grand introduction to the way in which the Turkish culture has incredible generosity. The Turkish person who helped me as a translator, before introducing me to his Turkish friends, some of whom I interviewed, proceeded to treat me to a feast of Turkish food and a dialogue of exchange between the American and Turkish political systems and cultural traditions. The overwhelming degree of welcome that I felt in his reception and the same of the people whom I interviewed was more than I ever could have expected. Many of the interviews I conducted were held in coffee shops or small cafés, where I intended to treat the people whom I interviewed to coffee and food as a demonstration of gratitude. However, I rarely was able to pay them back for their valuable time and information because they insisted on paying for not only themselves but also for me. The extent of their generosity was also usually marked by a proud declaration along the sentiment that the Turkish culture treats guests as family, which was invariably true and moreover proven time and time again.

I also learned about perceived differences between first generation Turkish immigrants and Turkish people who were born and raised in Berlin. The research

focused on first generation Turkish immigrants who had been required to take the naturalization test, rather than Turkish people who had been born and raised in Germany. One participant informed me that “Turkish people from Germany are not accepted in Turkey” because the Turkish culture native to Germany has grown apart from native Turkish culture and therefore lacks cultural commonalities. The participant went on to say that the “German [Turkish] attitude is different because they lack education and cause more violence.” Another research participant said that German Turks are “so far from [Turkish] culture...native Turkish culture is based more on respect... people here [in Berlin] are more religious in growing up.” This more conservative culture in Berlin creates a close-knit community that also complicated my ability to obtain interviews, because many often would look with suspicion upon someone who--not even German--wanted to ask questions about their experiences with immigration in Germany.

Language barriers also proved difficult. I was fortunate to have a translator at most of my interviews and usually did not need one, but on the occasions when a translator was unavailable, the interview process occasionally became more complicated. As a student of German, I had to expand my language abilities in order to adapt to understanding German spoken with an accent and grammatical error--something not required in a classroom setting.

The power of social networking is much stronger than I realized. When I encountered problems obtaining interviews for various reasons, including my original contact persons not being able to connect me with new interview sources or working

around peoples' vacation plans or business schedules, I turned to networking through the website couchsurfing.org. Couchsurfing is an organization designed for travelers who want to avoid the expense of hotels or hostels and at the same time want a more genuine experience of the local area in which they are staying. In addition to allowing people to find a place to stay, couchsurfing.org provides a forum that enables the users to post information about public events in different locales in addition to making requests to the wider couchsurfing community. I worked through the webpage for the couchsurfing community of Berlin in order to establish interview contacts. The couchsurfing community yielded great results to my request for interviews and the network often extended beyond my initial requests to other contacts as a result of the family-like structure of the Turkish community.

Even though I was able to work through family and friend connections to garner interviews, I was reliant on other peoples' schedules, which often led to not getting as many interviews as I had originally hoped. It tested my ability to wait patiently at points but on many occasions it was enlightening, as on one occasion I learned about Islamic burial rules after not hearing from a contact person who had helped me as a translator for a while, because he had had to fly back to Turkey to bury a family member. In total, my time in Germany was filled with learning experiences and allowed me to develop not only as a researcher, but also as a person with greater abilities to understand and respect other cultures.

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Rebecca K. Manseau
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