

An Anglo-German Foundation Report

Is it easier to be a Turk in Berlin or a Pakistani in Bradford?

Roger Boyes and Dorte Huneke

A difficult journey – Introduction

In 1933 J.B. Priestley embarked on an 'English Journey' and, as he criss-crossed the country, found himself naturally drawn to his home town of Bradford. It was, he said, 'one of the most provincial and yet one of the most cosmopolitan of English provincial cities.' The international dimension came partly from the wool trade but also from an influx of German and German-Jewish immigrants during the early and mid-Victorian periods. The houses they once inhabited are now, in part, owned by the British-Pakistani middle class. The parallels between then and now are not perfect, but the lesson drawn by Priestley so many years ago still holds good: 'History shows us that the countries that have opened their doors have gained just as the countries that have driven out large numbers of their citizens for racial, religious or political reasons, have always paid dearly for their lack of tolerance.'

That could serve as the motto for our study: Kreuzberg, like Bradford, has gained a new identity as the result of immigrant settlement. With 53,000 Turks (i.e. people of Turkish origin) living in this district which has a total population of 148,000, Kreuzberg is the biggest Turkish city district outside Asia Minor.

Berlin, like Bradford, was a magnet for foreigners. The Berlin telephone book lists names from Abaci to Zülfükar testifying to the need for foreign muscle and brainpower as the city grew. Between 1900 and 1914, the population of Berlin doubled from 2 million to 4 million – nearly 400 new inhabitants every day, most of them of foreign origin; Kreuzberg, in particular, was always attractive to immigrants.

Neither Bradford nor Berlin can count as great success stories in today's globalised business culture. Berlin, despite being the capital of Europe's largest economy, is close to bankruptcy and bereft of significant industries. It is struggling to merge the eastern and western sections, and the decades of federal subsidies to West Berlin have made the city slower to react to global changes than Hamburg, Stuttgart or Munich. Bradford continues to suffer from the problem pinpointed by Priestley: the proximity of prosperous Leeds and the natural trend of the young and ambitious to seek their fortunes outside Bradford.

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In uncertain times for both cities, the immigrant community can be seen either as a burden – on welfare payments or educational resources – or as a hidden strength. No single person, no single authority can clearly determine whether Berlin and Bradford remain essentially open cities or whether, accompanied by broader European fears about Islam and immigration, they are beginning to close the gates and pull down the shutters.

That is what we wanted to look at through the prism of the deceptively simple question: 'Is it easier to be a Turk in Berlin, or a Pakistani in Bradford?' There is no sensible way of measuring happiness and so we steer clear of academic methodology. Nor did we want to become prisoners of political labels like multiculturalism, parallel societies or cohesive citizenship that seem to cloud an absence of policy rather than accurately describe the situation on the ground.

Berlin and Bradford have both been 'multicultural' for the best part of two centuries; they were open to foreign cultures and grew with them. It was never a uniform process.

Britain is not under quite the same demographic pressure as Germany and its unemployment rates are lower. But the obstacles to integration of South Asians were highlighted by the Bradford, Oldham and Burnley riots. Britain, like Germany, has to find an appropriate political vocabulary to deal with large and increasingly self-confident minority communities. The citizenship rights accorded to South Asians seem on the face of it to put Pakistanis in Bradford at an advantage over the Turks in Berlin. Yet the apparent advantages in the legal and political situation of Pakistanis do not always translate into improved life-chances. Ten years ago it was a safe assumption that the British Pakistani was better placed than the Berlin Turk. Now, the comparison is not so clear-cut. Why do Bradford Pakistanis – seemingly so privileged – take to the streets, while Kreuzberg Turks do not?

We have tried to trace some pattern of social mobility in the ethnic communities (as reporters we have a natural bias towards personal biographies) to see how and why opportunities are used or ignored, and to highlight some of the current obstacles to integration. The essential question seemed to us: How much state? How much individual? The balance between what the state can do to further integration, and the individual's readiness to shape his or her own future in the host country is plainly different in Britain and in Germany. Yet there are parallels: 'You have to learn not German, but the language of bureaucratic thought,' says Vural Öger, a German Turk who has created his own travel group, 'That is the first step to success.' Omar Khan, owner of Bradford's most famous curry house, agrees: 'Both sides have to adapt to each other, the individual and the state. But ultimately the state has to remove the barriers, let us find our own way within, and not against, British society.' Can Bradford learn from Berlin, Berlin from Bradford?

For more information please contact:

Annette Birkholz
Anglo-German Foundation/Deutsch-Britische Stiftung
34 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8DZ
Tel +44 (0)20 7823 1123, Fax +44 (0)20 7823 2324
E-mail ab@agf.org.uk, Website www.agf.org.uk

Roger Boyes, E-mail RogerBoyes@compuserve.com
Dorte Huneke, E-mail dorte.huneke@gmx.de

Notes to the editor:

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The authors of the report are:

Roger Boyes, Germany Correspondent, The Times, Trabener Straße 16, 14193 Berlin, Germany; and Dorte Huneke, Freelance Journalist, Rodenbergstraße 4, 10439 Berlin, Germany.