Summary of Proposed Research

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Ethnic Minorities and Political Mobilisation: Aussiedler, Turks and Jews in Germany

Of the millions of immigrants who have arrived in Germany since World War II, three groups stand out: Aussiedler (ethnic Germans), Jews, and Turks. The three million Aussiedler – Germans by “bloodline” – were settled in rural areas of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and Eastern Europe centuries ago, and began returning to Germany from the 1940’s onwards and in large numbers since Perestroika in the 1980’s. Today, they are visibly present in most regions of Germany. Since the end of the Cold War, the majority of Jewish migrants in Germany come from urban areas of the FSU. While relatively small in number (roughly 200,000), the presence of this group, along with the previously existing tiny Jewish community, play a critical role in the formation of German national memory. The Turks began to arrive in Germany from the late 1950’s onwards, coincident with the post-war economic boom. They initially came as temporary Gastarbeiter (guest workers) but today constitute the largest non-ethnic German immigrant population in Germany, at about 2.5 million, as permanent long-term residents or citizens.

Each of these groups represents an experience of migration from a country-of-origin to a country-of-reception. Ironically, however, the German state and public discourse are reluctant to regard any of the three groups as immigrants. The Aussiedler are considered part of the German ethnos, or Volk; the Jews, for cultural/historical reasons, are granted special status with the Volk; and the Turks are not part of the German Volk at all. Why is German political discourse so reluctant to recognize them as immigrants?

This paradox raises three subsequent questions. First, about the narrative: what are the ideological/political roles that these three minorities perform in German political discourse? In terms of what I describe as “ideological labour”, the Jews are considered the guardians of memory, both of the Holocaust and of the high points in German history, from the Middle Ages to the Weimar Republic. The Aussiedler presence affirms the idea of the industrious German Volk, while the Turks are seen as the radical other, in both culture and religion. The project seeks, first, to address precisely how these themes manifest themselves in German political discourse. Second, it asks how these groups are internally structured. This implies their internal variety of class, regional, religious and political disparities, their leadership, and the “field” (Bourdieu) into which that leadership is embedded. In particular, this includes people who act as liaisons or gatekeepers on the German side, such as their involvement in ministries, political parties and institutions of civil society; including people from their own ethnic group who “crossed the line”. And third, much neglected in the literature, is the question of interethnic relations: how do the three groups orient their behaviour on one another? How does one group use the other as a model for its own objectives on the path from being new immigrants to becoming an institutionally established ethnic minority? Here again, questions of political discourse, ethnic narratives, and ideological labour come into play. Unlike some other recent migration literature, this project seeks to restore the relational and referential aspects of ethnic group formation within its broader socio-political context. This new project is based on the PI’s extensive work on pre- and post-1989 German Jewry, and more recently, his research on the Turkish migration to Germany. The PI and his Research Assistants will pursue this line of research through an extensive use of archival and public access material in Germany, literary sources, cinema, and a series of in-depth open-ended interviews with members of the target communities in Germany, key German officials and some community members in the countries outside Germany.