

Ari Sammartino:

Comment on “Goods and People: Drugs, Immigration and the German *Ausländerproblem* 1960-1975,” by Robert P. Stephens

In a clearly written and persuasive narrative, Robert Stephens explores both the history of drug trafficking and its representation in the German public sphere as part of the German discourse on foreigners during the 1960s and 1970s. The paper begins with an exploration of the shifts that occurred in drug production and distribution during this period. Contrary to conventional wisdom, he argues that the growing importance of worldwide networks of growers and traffickers was primarily driven by demand, misguided attempts at enforcement by western powers and political instability. As Western powers (led by the United States) tried to crack down on the production and distribution of illegal drugs, they only succeeded in driving the drug trade underground to places and routes that were even more difficult to police or monitor. All told, the story that Stephens narrates is one of unintended consequences—for example, cracking down on the use of prescription drugs by Hamburg youth in 1972 drove these addicts first to synthetic narcotic methadone and then to heroin. In addition to complicating narratives about the drug trade, Stephens shows how anti-drug rhetoric in the Federal Republic easily shaded over into anti-foreigner rhetoric. In the second section of his paper, he presents evidence depicting how both the police and the press associated drugs with a “foreign” threat and emphasized the perfidy of international drug cartels who targeted “innocent” German youth.

I think everyone at this conference will probably accept Stephens’s contention that the “war on drugs” has had many missteps and that blaming foreigners, especially Turks, for Germany’s drug problem is simplistic at best and racist at worst. At the same time, I found myself wishing that he had gone further in his analysis to actually explore the meaning of the metaphor of the Turkish drug trafficker, the significance of this image for German understandings of foreigners and ultimately what his work makes us understand better or rethink about the history of the Federal Republic. As these are all issues that I am sure that Stephens develops further elsewhere in his work, I would merely ask that he make these connections clearer for us. In the second part of this comment, I’ll just list a number of questions that this work raises for me, in the hopes that we can discuss them further at the conference.

Stephens states “the connection between Turkish residents and drug dealing had a powerful effect on the public image of the foreigner.” (p. 26) Yet, he does not explicitly explore

what this effect was. Were Germans more likely to think ill of Turks because of their supposed complicity with drug trafficking? In what way did the image of the Turkish drug smuggler fit in with the host of negative images of foreigners (and Turks in particular) circulating during this period? Is it similar? Did it differ? How? What does the image of the Turkish drug trafficker reveal about German stereotypes about foreigners? How, for example, does it connect with the history of German images of foreigners? (I can certainly see ways that this seems related (at least on a discursive levels) to anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jewish peddlers and Jewish attempts to poison the German people, is this actually relevant? If so, how?) What connection, moreover, does he wish to draw between the internationalization of the drug trade with international movements of population? As it is, the two sections of the paper are not really linked. How does Stephens want to link them? Are the stories of “guest workers” and drug trafficking connected on anything but a discursive level? For example, did this sensationalization of drugs have actual effects on policy?

At one point, Stephens make the comment that “in the end, it was much more important to the Bonn government to protect legitimate trade than to quash the smuggling of illicit drugs.” (p. 18) I wonder how policymakers and police reconciled these two issues—allowing “legitimate” trade while restricting “illegitimate” trade? If Stephens is correct that the Bonn government placed the goals of trade above that of stopping the flow of illegal drugs, then, it would seem to me that the sensationalism of accounts of drug addicted German youth and the evil foreigners that preyed upon them needs to be seen in light of the fact that Germany was inexorably becoming more caught up in the world. German anxieties about being both a “land of immigrants” and a “land of consumption” were both expressed in the hysterical anti-drug/anti-foreigner rhetoric that Stephens explores. Ultimately, however, this rhetoric calmed down (and I wonder what caused that shift). Moreover, it seems, at least from Stephens’s text, even at its height, this rhetoric seems to have had little effect on actual policy. That being the case, I would like to hear about how people reconciled these two issues (the need to stop drugs but allow trade). I am also curious about how, if at all, the sensationalizing of drug narratives affected the ways that people felt about and responded to migrants in Germany? I know that these are difficult issues to answer, and the answers may be more impressionistic than conclusive. Nonetheless, I believe that the connections between anti-drug and anti-foreigner rhetoric need to be contextualized and analyzed if this study is to help scholars to understand the history of the Federal Republic.