

Regional

Miller studies Germany's economic history

Given the current financial woes of the European Union, Germany has suddenly become the focus of many news reports – and many controversies – due to its insistence that other EU member states enact sometimes draconian economic austerity measures.

“Germany is the largest economy in Europe and as such they do play a large role in determining what measures should be taken,” explained Jennifer Miller, an assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. “I think there are some divisions among Germans themselves about whether they see themselves as part of the European economy that doesn’t recognize national borders, or whether they see themselves as German citizens who are financing financial problems in other places in Europe, problems some feel were caused by other people’s missteps or lack of motivation to accept austerity measures.”

Born in Mobile, Ala., Miller obtained her bachelor’s degree in German from Davidson College in North Carolina, and her master’s in women’s and gender studies and doctorate in history, both from Rutgers University in New Jersey. Since early in her life she has been interested in Germany, its history and politics. One of the engines that have made Germany an economic powerhouse has been the integration of Turkish immigrants into German society, she said.

“The largest xenophobic reaction against German minorities happened around 1990-91, at the end of the Cold War,” Miller said. “Because that’s when you had the largest rate of unemployment in Eastern Germany. In addition to the Turks, all groups of foreigners, regardless of how long they’d been in Germany or what they added to the economy, were targeted randomly with xenophobic attacks and slogans.” Today, Turks make up about 10 percent of the German population, Miller said.

“Whether they are integrated is a tricky question,” she added. “In Germany all are thrown into a largely public school system where you sink or swim. They sort their students out at the age of 11 and determine



Dr. Jennifer Miller

whether or not they are going to college. If you don’t master the language by then or your parents are not involved in the school or are not fluent, you may not get on the track that best suits you.” Miller also thinks that the fact that Turks are Muslims has compounded the problem.

“The most recent national census started counting Muslims for the first time,” Miller said. “And it’s interesting because not all

Turks who came over were necessarily what you would think of today as strict Muslims.” Another issue is attitudes of Germans about their country’s past, both before and during World War II.

“I am from Alabama and we also have a dark history,” Miller said. “I know that when I say I’m from Alabama that that comes to a lot of people’s minds and it is part of the historical legacy of where I’m from. Just

like I had several years of Alabama history, Germans also have large amounts of historical classes on the Holocaust and school groups often visit museums and concentration camps. They are highly educated about what happened and I think that makes a difference in both cases, to make sure that people follow the history and understand what happened.” Another political question is whether people from the former

Photo courtesy of Amy Foerster

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

East Germany feel really integrated into the reunified Germany.

“A historian would not say yes or no to something like that,” Miller said. “When Germany was reunified in the early 90s, the differences were very striking in terms of infrastructure, roads and services. There was a very high unemployment rate, especially among women because East Germany sought full employment. The West German model was more the male breadwinner model and didn’t really expect women to pursue a career. I think that in older generations they might feel that maybe they don’t have that much in common with their neighbors in the West.”

Miller published a work a few years ago in which she argued that the idea that the world is divided between Western Civilization and “everyone else” is wrong.

“The idea that the world is divided like that is not a good way to think about history,” she said. “It is not how we conduct research, and yet when we are in the classroom we are kind of forced back into the models that we can spend our whole graduate career breaking down. In this global world it seems an outdated concept. I think Gandhi is famous for saying when asked what he thought of Western Civilization, he replied ‘Oh! I think that would be a good idea.’”

Miller’s next project is to work on the files of the defunct East German secret police known as Stasi. “I’ve gotten access to a large set of Stasi documents,” Miller said. “There are about 3,000 pages worth of Stasi files on Turkish guest workers who were crossing from the West into East Germany, and the Stasi watched them very carefully.”

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.