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Successful integration or separation? The history of Polish-German migration to the Ruhr Valley (1860-1950)

This paper will deal with Polish-German migration to the Ruhr Valley in the late nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century. In light of current debates on refugees, the study will elucidate how the current migration to Europe is in no way a completely new or unique situation. On the contrary, by looking at the early Polish-German migration to the Ruhr Valley, it will demonstrate the ways and the extent to which the accompanying negotiation and exchange process between newcomers and residents shaped the life and society of this region. Along these lines, I will first examine the early contact in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as more and more people from Polish-speaking regions came to the Ruhr Valley in search of work. Secondly, I will discuss the impact that World War I and the subsequent nation-state-based demarcations in Europe had on life and ideas of belonging in the Ruhr Valley. Thirdly, I will turn to World War II and the expansion of National Socialism in Europe and trace the complex relationship between miners of Polish origin and forced laborers. Overall, this paper contributes to a better understanding of how relationships developed in many different ways between those who moved to the Ruhr Valley and those who had resided there for some time already.