

4.1 Migration and nation in French history

The following account, based on Yves Lequin's famous book about the 'Frenchmosaic', reveals the complex ethnic origins of a modern nation-state.

Ancient Gaul encompassed much of the area of modern-day France. At the collapse of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century AD, Gaul was inhabited by a patchwork of culturally and politically diverse peoples, including Roman citizens and soldiers, slaves, settled Germanic tribes and more recent arrivals. There were multiple centres of political power. Celts from the west of Britain moved across the English Channel to what is now Brittany, to escape the invading Saxons. These Celts fought with the embryonic Frankish state, from which the medieval French kingdom would emerge.

Norse raiders wreaked havoc upon the Frankish territory and, from 900 AD, they settled in the area now called Normandy. The expansion of the Frankish state and its steady incorporation of adjacent lands and peoples was a long process, and French identity and consciousness emerged slowly. Life for most inhabitants of medieval France was encapsulated by the village and its environs, but there was awareness of the exterior world. To the inhabitants of the Frankish state, the people of Brittany, Normandy or Languedoc were foreigners.

But there were also newcomers: traders and artists from Italy, mercenaries, itinerant clergy, scholars and musicians, Muslim slaves from North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and Spain, as well as Jews and gypsies. Jews lived interspersed with the rest of the population and most appear to have spoken the local language. During the Crusades, Jews became scapegoats and victims of violence and persecution. Enforced residential segregation - ghettos - became commonplace. In 1306, the French king, Philip the Fair, ordered the expulsion of the Jews, who by that time numbered about 100 000, allowing him to seize Jewish possessions. But in 1315 economic considerations led King Louis X to reopen the doors of the French kingdom to Jews. It was only with the French Revolution of 1789 that Jews gained legal

equality with the Christian population as citizens. However, some people continued to regard Jews as foreigners to the French nation. Even today, the propaganda of the far-right *Front National* (FN) has marked anti-Semitic overtones.

The gypsies, also called the Rom or the Tzigane, are the descendants of a people who emigrated from the area of present-day India. Travelling in groups of 50 to 100, they spread throughout the kingdom, hawking their wares. There were soon manifestations of hostility towards them. French cities such as Angers banned them in 1498, followed soon after by King François I's edict prohibiting them from entering his kingdom. The gypsies returned and became part of French society, but they were never fully accepted by some people. Like the Jews, they were singled out for extermination by the Nazis during the Second World War. The roots of twentieth-century genocide were deeply etched in the history of immigration to European countries. Jews and gypsies have been perhaps the most enduring targets of European racism.

The fifteenth century was a turning point at which early modern states emerged. This is the dawn of the Age of Discovery in which Europeans circumnavigated the globe, beginning a long process which eventually brought the world under European domination. By the eighteenth century, the 'divine right of kings' was being questioned. The ideas that gave rise to the 1789 French Revolution included the principle of popular sovereignty, the concept of the nation-state and the idea that every human being belongs to a state. These ideas are particularly significant for our theme: international migration would be meaningless in a world not organized into nation-states. One of the key attributes of sovereignty is the idea, now universally accepted, that states have the authority to regulate movement into and out of the territory of the state. Illegal immigration has become such a politically volatile issue today partly because it is seen as violating one of the main prerogatives of sovereign states.

References

Lequin, Y. (ed.) (1988) *La Mosaïque France* (Paris: Larousse).