

# Migration (Norway)

By [Eirik Brazier](#)

## Summary

The outbreak of war in 1914 resulted in an unprecedented influx of foreign citizens who travelled to and through Norway. The population of Norway was relatively heterogeneous and the increase in foreigners raised concerns among both decision-makers and society. During the latter part of the war, the uncovering of several German spy networks strengthened these fears. Norwegian authorities responded by introducing legislation that gave the police the ability to enforce stricter control and monitoring of foreigners and other groups defined as “outsiders”. This surveillance regime promoted ethnic cohesion and would have long-term consequences for ethnic minorities in Norway.

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## Introduction

The First World War disrupted travel, trade, and the flow of information across Europe. The physical division of the continent caused by trench warfare turned [Norway](#) and other [neutral](#) Scandinavian countries on the periphery into key transit hubs. This article describes how this change caused an increase in [migration](#) to and through Norway during the war, how Norwegian officials responded to this influx of migrants, and how these developments and the war influenced both legislation and attitudes towards foreigners and ethnic minorities within Norway.<sup>1</sup>

## Norway as a Transit Area during the War

The outbreak of war caused severe disruptions to all forms of travel across Europe, as [shipping](#) lanes closed and roads, canals, rivers, ports and railways became overcrowded by

soldiers and military equipment. At the same time, war also triggered a considerable migration of people across Europe, as expatriates attempted to return home in order to do military service, citizens from neutral countries fled for the safety of their countries of origin, and [refugees](#) scrambled to get away from the hostilities. Hence, in the early months of the war, tens of thousands of people were on the move and attempting to cross through what had become a war zone. Over the coming years, the movement of people, information and goods across a divided continent became increasingly difficult. The neutral Scandinavian countries became one option for those traveling across the continent and transformed Norway, [Sweden](#), and [Denmark](#) into transit hubs. In Norway, the port city of Bergen and its semi-regular ship traffic to the eastern coast of the [United States](#) and [Great Britain](#) became an important link in a chain that stretched from Asia to North America, as only a limited number of steam liners were allowed to service destinations in Britain and the United States.<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian capital, Christiania (today Oslo), also became an important chain in this migration route, as the city's train station received traffic from both Denmark and Sweden.<sup>3</sup> During the war, thousands of individuals followed this route and passed through Bergen, Christiania, and other local port cities. These newly arrived migrants were highly visible in a relatively homogenous Norwegian [society](#): they spoke and behaved differently from their local hosts.

One of the first groups of migrants that captured the public's attention was male expatriates from the belligerent nations who either left or passed through Norway in the first couple of weeks after hostilities broke out in 1914. On the evening of 2 August 1914, approximately 400 German men left Christiania by train with the intention of returning to [Germany](#) to serve in the war. These expatriates were followed by a further 400 Germans who left the following evening to the accompaniment of "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*" ("Germany, Germany above all") and "*Die Wacht am Rhein*" ("The Watch on the Rhine") being sung by hundreds of well-wishers.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in the first few weeks of the war, there were many trains either leaving or crossing through Norway that carried British, French, Russian, German, and Austrian expatriates returning home. This mass exodus from different European countries was only the beginning. In the following years, thousands of foreign citizens would travel through or to Norway. While the majority of these foreigners did not stay in Norway for an extended period of time, some of them did settle. The latter group largely consisted of, among others, people expelled from belligerent countries at the outbreak of war or poor unskilled labourer migrants from neighbouring Sweden attracted to Norway due to the [economic](#) wartime boom. There were, however, also Russian and Finnish émigrés, whose numbers would grow during the war.

Both short-term visitors and long-term migrants influenced Norwegian society. The [press](#)

portrayed them as contributing to the rising cost of basic services and utilities. Housing was scarce and an increase in people searching for short- and long-term accommodation caused an increase in housing costs. The prices of fuel and other daily essentials were also on the rise, as the war resulted in limited imports.<sup>5</sup> An increasing number of newspaper articles blamed the rising cost of living on foreign citizens or the “stranger” (*fremmede*).

## First Legislative Efforts

Faced with a sudden inflow of foreign citizens and migrants, officials in all of the Scandinavian countries struggled to find appropriate measures that would both cope with those already in the country and set limits on future arrivals. Existing migration legislation was evaluated and updated, and new laws were debated by both parliaments and the public. In both Denmark and Sweden, authorities could rely on either existing legislation or legislation swiftly introduced at the outbreak of war to check both migration and [espionage](#). In Norway, the only pre-war migration legislation was the Aliens Act of 1901, but its aim had primarily been to limit the influx of poor Swedish transient workers and it was considered ineffective. A committee had been working on proposals for an espionage law since 1912, but it had not passed through parliament when war broke out in 1914. The war, however, did inject a sense of urgency into its passage and provisional legislation was introduced in autumn 1914.<sup>6</sup> The Norwegian parliament also hastily approved amendments to the existing Aliens Act. Foreign citizens were, among other things, now obliged to register with the authorities within three days of arrival. Despite these legislative changes, regulation of foreign citizens entering, traveling across or leaving Norway remained relatively relaxed during the first winter of the war, as officials were slow to coordinate their efforts and lacked the human resources needed to implement the new regime.

In the spring of 1915, however, the government proposed substantial changes to the Aliens Act of 1901. The government’s proposals included a more rigorous system for registering foreign citizens, separate registration for foreign business people, and a register of any foreign citizen wanting to settle in or search for employment in Norway. Police authorities also received extended privileges concerning the expulsion of foreign citizens. In addition, the police force itself experienced significant re-organization. It was [Johan Sørh \(1867-1949\)](#), the chief of Norway’s counterintelligence police, who spearheaded these latter changes. Since the outbreak of war, Sørh had been a strong proponent of stricter migration legislation in order to prevent Norway from becoming the final destination of what he termed the dregs of Europe. In public and in private, Sørh spoke of the many unknown threats that Norway faced due to the war. Sørh and his supporters’ efforts to tighten migration control, however, were not always motivated by the activities of foreign intelligences services, but rather their

[negative views](#) of minority groups. Consequently, new legislation spoke of preventing “the immigration of physically and morally weak individuals”.<sup>7</sup> In an age of growing state control and ethnic exclusivity, groups like the Romani, [Jews](#) and other “undesirables” were under increasing pressure to assimilate into or be excluded from Norwegian society. Hence, the consequences of the passing of the Aliens Act in 1915 were twofold: firstly, it intended to limit or curb the arrival of foreign citizens to Norway. Secondly, it marked an important step towards a state policy intent on strengthening social cohesion and ethnic exclusivity in the face of minority groups.

## Public Debate

The new legislation received only minor opposition in the Norwegian parliament, and most amendments to the Aliens Act of 1915 were adopted unopposed. Parliamentary debate reflected growing concern over the effects of the war and the consequences that mass migration would have on Norway and its society. Minister of Justice [Lars K. Abrahamsen \(1855-1921\)](#) (Liberal) was forthright about the rationale behind the government’s proposals. He observed that stricter migration legislation had been introduced all across Europe, both in the decades prior to and at the outbreak of war. Abrahamsen argued that Norway would have to follow suit in order to protect its own society. There was a threat, he argued, that if Norway did not amend its legislation, the country would be the recipient of all unwanted migrants from the rest of the continent. It would not be wise, he stated, to turn Norway “into Europe’s sewer” by allowing all kinds of “thieves, bandits, and murderers” to enter the country unhindered. Abrahamsen’s language might have been blunt, but it resonated with large sections of Norwegian society, who increasingly felt the impact of the war.<sup>8</sup>

The effects of increased migration were a growing concern in the public eye. Port cities like Bergen were struggling to handle the thousands of foreign citizens who were seeking passage across the Atlantic or to Britain. The war at sea and especially the activities of German [submarines](#) often caused severe delays to ships departing from Norway and passengers were forced to stay for days or weeks awaiting safe passage. Consequently, the presence of a large number of foreign citizens caused increased pressure on local resources, and some newspapers advocated the introduction of a tax on foreign citizens.

A scarcity of resources and the brutality of modern war coarsened the public discourse about outsiders and foreigners. National newspapers and opinion-makers were quick to describe the increase in people traveling through and settling in Norway in derogative terms. Newspapers described the influx of migrants as “a flood”, “a human wave”, “a torrent” or “an invasion of strangers” (*fremmedinvasjonen*). Certainly, these descriptions echoed

Abrahamsen's statement in parliament.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it strengthened depictions of migrants and other outsiders as a dehumanized mass. The "stranger" was not an individual, but rather part of a larger and ominous whole that threatened Norwegian society. *Aftenposten*, a leading national newspaper, concluded that Norwegians should not be naïve and "allow foreigners [to] misuse [their] trust and hospitality".<sup>10</sup> Hence, the war had introduced a new sense of urgency and energy into the debate about migration.

In both newspapers and policy documents, it became increasingly important to define society's insiders and outsiders. The revised Aliens Act of 1915 and the subsequent introduction of stricter border control represented a bulwark against outside threats brought on by the war. Rhetoric and language also reflected a society that believed it was under siege.

## Spy Mania and the Aliens Act of 1917

The phenomenon known as [spy mania](#) (*spionfeber*) gripped Norway, like most other countries during the war. Moreover, the phenomenon, like in other countries, influenced attitudes towards both migrants and foreigners among decision-makers and society in general. The fear of foreign agents and collaborators equipped with perceived sinister plans to cause harm brought the public to mass hysteria and swept through both belligerent and neutral societies. In Norway, the public inundated the police and other government officials with observations of shady foreign-looking individuals, mysterious lights, and strange occurrences. People believed it to be part of a covert attack on Norwegian society. Misunderstandings, unwarranted accusations, and anxiety were the basis for much of this public fear, but foreign states did indeed have [spies](#) operating in Norway. From 1916 to 1917, the Norwegian police uncovered several German spy networks operating in Narvik, Bergen, and Christiania. In addition to these arrests, a German diplomatic courier, [Walter von Gerich \(1881-1939\)](#), had smuggled large quantities of explosives into the country and hidden them in the Norwegian capital. Norwegian newspapers labelled the von Gerich case as the "bomb case" (*bombesaken*), and it attracted massive media attention during the late summer of 1917.<sup>11</sup> The diplomatic courier and his collaborators were Finnish exiles in the employment of the German naval intelligence service. Their arrest caused public uproar, demands for harsh punishment, and a minor diplomatic incident with Germany after Norwegian officials revealed that von Gerich had exploited his diplomatic immunity to smuggle explosives into Norway. The intended targets of their activity remained unclear, but contemporary speculations in the press identified Norwegian ships as the obvious target. The arrests and subsequent trials also coincided with Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare, which caused a dramatic increase in Norwegian shipping losses.

Spy mania and the many arrests of German agents during 1917 added fuel to existing narratives that depicted foreigners as a threat to Norway. These foreign agents and locally recruited collaborators were “dark”, “sinister”, and they were sometimes identified as of “Jewish descent”, according to both court transcripts and newspaper reports.<sup>12</sup> The arrest of local Norwegian accomplices was, according to newspapers, evidence of the persuasive abilities of the foreigners and their intention to corrupt the local population. In newspaper reports from the subsequent trials, Norway was portrayed as being invaded by a host of mysterious agents, a narrative that added to an existing trope of the foreigner as a threat to Norwegian society. Spy mania and the trials against foreign operatives established a firm connection in the public discourse between the foreigner and immoral behaviour. This spy mania was also to be a decisive influence on reconstituting the public image of foreign citizens. The assumption was that a spy would hide among the many immigrants who had arrived due to the war.

The official response to this spy mania and increase in migration was to progressively expand a surveillance regime to control and monitor foreigners. In the summer of 1917, the government introduced another revision of the Aliens Act. It added two important pieces of legislation concerned with the influx of foreign citizens. The legislation restricted the movement of foreigners within Norway and gave authorities the power to prevent foreign citizens from settling in certain geographical areas of the country. Another part of the new legislation reintroduced a requirement for all foreigners to carry a passport and to obtain a visa in order to enter the country. This latter legislation rescinded a previous law from 1860, which had allowed any foreigner to enter the country without a passport.<sup>13</sup> The new legislation made it even easier for the police to expel foreigners with a criminal record.

Norwegian authorities also made organizational changes, as the police and counter-intelligence services expanded both their fields of operation and staff. These changes included the creation of a central registry of foreign citizens (*fremmedregister*) and the establishment of a centralized office to deal with passports (*Centralpasskontoret*). The state established a new regime of control and monitoring of foreigners. It also generated masses of new information from thousands of printed forms distributed throughout the country in order to collect data. The result manifested itself in statistics, tangible evidence on the number of foreign citizens within Norway’s borders. The re-introduction of passports and visas also extended the state’s geographical power. These latter changes moved the border control checks beyond the national border and required foreigners to produce valid papers before entering the country. It was a new control regime that found its legitimation in the war and the perceived chaos that accompanied the conflict.

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## Notes

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## External Links

- [Gatrell, Peter: Europe on the move. Refugees and World War One \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Knutsen, Jan Normann: Norway in the First World War, Folia Scandinavica vol. 5, Poznan 1999 \(Adam Mickiewicz University Repository\) \(Article\)](#)

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