Germany: Violence against foreigners increases by 40 percent

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Right-wing violence against foreigners in Germany has increased dramatically over the last year. The situation is particularly dangerous for foreigners living in eastern Germany—this was the conclusion drawn by Federal Interior Minister Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party—SPD) in a recent press interview.

Official figures covering the whole year are still not available, however, politicians responsible for the situation are already sounding the alarm—mainly as a means of diverting any suggestion of their own culpability in the matter.

Schily announced in the Hamburg magazine *Die Woche* that xenophobic acts of violence have increased by 40 percent in the last 12 months. In total, 13,753 criminal offences committed by right-wing extremists were registered in the period from January to November 2000. In the same period in 1999, the figure stood at 9,456 offences. Violence against foreigners rose from 397 cases to 553. Schily reported, “Killings, bodily injuries, arson and bomb attacks constituted 18 percent of all xenophobic crimes”. More than two-thirds of the convicted offenders were younger than 21 years-of-age.

Shortly before Schily's announcement, Manfred Püchel (SPD deputy for the former East German state of Saxony-Anhalt, and chairman of the Council of Interior Ministers for the federal states) reported that an increase of 50 percent was anticipated. According to Püchel, 1,029 criminal offences in Saxony-Anhalt have been attributed to right-wing violence—an increase of 11 percent on the previous year.

Schily said that eastern Germany was clearly a stronghold of right-wing and neo-Nazi violence. Half of all acts of violence were committed there, although eastern Germany constitutes just 21 percent of the nation's total population. He told the press that, “For every 100,000 inhabitants in eastern Germany, there are about three times as many right-wing extremist crimes as there are for every 100,000 inhabitants in the west:” a ratio of 23 to seven. If one considers the much smaller proportion of foreigners living in eastern Germany, “then the figures appear even gloomier”.

It can also be assumed that these statistics omit a high number of unrecorded cases, especially when the Federal Interior Minister stresses that, “Corrections have indeed been made” in recording right-wing offences. He claimed, “Today the position is that a total of 36 people were killed as a result of violent assaults motivated by right-wing radicalism between 1990 and July 2000.” Last September, however, journalists from the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and the *Tagesspiegel* published a well-researched list of victims of neo-fascist violence. Even if one ignores those crimes where evidence of right-wing extremism is clearly apparent but has been disputed by officialdom, at least 93 people—foreigners, punks, and homeless persons—have been murdered in the 10 years since the reunification of Germany.

When this list was published six months ago, Schily hastened to announce that he was having his ministry's statistics reviewed. Since then, the official number of deaths resulting from right-wing violence up to last September has risen from 26 to 36. But this figure still lies well under half the number identified by the journalists.

When questioned about the dramatic increase in right-wing violence in Germany, Schily referred to the well-worn anti-communist prejudice about “the failure of socialism” and said: “The system of rule in the GDR (former Stalinist German Democratic Republic) has left in its wake a great deal of psychological and spiritual destruction.” In fact a major part of this spiritual collapse lies precisely in equating the Stalinist SED (Socialist Unity Party) regime with socialism and the discrediting of a socialist perspective in the eyes of many workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has already published detailed articles on the nationalist policies of the SED and the responsibility of the GDR for the alarming emergence of right-wing violence in eastern Germany. There are many reasons to account for the fact that right-wing extremism has found conditions favourable for its growth in eastern Germany. But it is by no means the case that all these explanations relate to the past.

Questioned about the extent to which “spiritual decline” in

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the east might have something to do with the conditions that exist today after reunification, the Interior Minister had nothing to say.

Actually, the answer is obvious. Official unemployment is almost twice as high in eastern Germany as in the west. In many industrial centres of the former GDR, one in every four people is unemployed, and this is the case even though a large part of the population capable of work has already moved out of these areas. The situation is utterly hopeless as far as young people are concerned.

Apart from the problem of unemployment, impoverished municipal councils are implementing cost-cutting programmes involving the closure of more leisure facilities, public libraries and youth centres.

The fact that growing discontent is at present not directed along progressive, socialist lines is to a large extent explained by the role of the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor organisation to the SED). While claiming to be socialist, it behaves as a bourgeois party, and wherever it wields political influence, vies with the SPD and CDU (Christian Democratic Union) in the implementation of austerity measures. Under such conditions, the social and political crisis is providing fertile ground for right-wing and neo-Nazi demagogy.

When the president of the federal parliament, Wolfgang Thierse (SPD), publicly delivered his realistic assessment of the situation in eastern Germany a few weeks ago, he provoked a storm of indignation among east German SPD politicians. Among other things, he stressed that, “Compared to western Germany, right-wing radicalism bears a more brutal visage in the east; where it has managed to weave itself into the very fabric of society.” Economically, politically and socially, eastern Germany “hangs in the balance”. Although almost no one contradicted what he said, he was put under pressure—particularly by the eastern German state premiers—to tone down the stance he had taken in his white paper on the subject or to withdraw it completely.

His statements may have been basically correct, but it was considered that by being so brutally frank he would deter potential investment in eastern Germany. In responding to Thierse, Andreas Birkmann (Minister for Justice in Thuringia) drew attention to the large proportion of criminal offences “that have been motivated by an attitude of youthful protest.” The important thing was, “whether we are dealing with offenders who hold genuine political convictions or merely culprits who have temporarily stumbled into right-wing circles”—in other words right-wing violence is just a form of youth protest.

It is conspicuous that the increase in right-wing violence over the last year coincided with the government's own campaign against right-wing radicalism. Otto Schily is trying to cover up this fact by claiming that the government campaign has alerted the public to the seriousness of the problem, leading to more charges being made against right-wing offenders; public authorities have also been called upon to identify right-wing offences more openly.

Such arguments merely aim at mollifying criticism. In reality, the rise in right-wing violence casts a revealing light on the government campaign. An undermining of social solidarity and a glorification of selfish and uncaring attitudes have accompanied the constant ravaging of the social security system and drastic austerity programmes. At the same time the government's campaign against right-wing extremism is aimed, above all, at tightening up laws and beefing up state powers. Democratic rights are being systematically eroded or done away with. The whole political spectrum is moving further to the right and this is bolstering and encouraging right-wing offenders.

Along with these processes it is appropriate to consider the xenophobic policies of the government. Interior Minister Schily bears a particularly personal responsibility for the institutionalised racism at work in the routine operation of his office. Responding to the issue of refugees seeking protection from torture, murder and hunger, it was he who declared that “the limits of Germany's capacity [to absorb asylum seekers]” had been reached. He co-operated closely and amicably with the extremely right-wing Bavarian interior minister, Günter Beckstein (CSU, Christian Social Union), when it came to impeding—if not preventing—the entry of refugees into Germany, or speeding up the deportation of those who had managed to get into the country.

It was Schily's close friend, Beckstein, who divided foreigners into “those we can use and those who exploit us”. This is nothing other than a statesmanlike form of the Nazi slogan, “foreigners out”. And that is the kind of politics that is being embraced by some of Germany's youth.

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