

The deadly consequences of Germany's refugee policy

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It is routine for the German federal government to condemn violence against foreigners when the violence is committed by neo-Nazis and racists on the street. The government, moreover, rarely misses an opportunity to call for expanded state powers and restrictions on democratic rights on the pretext of combating the neo-Nazis.

But, in fact, statements by politicians like Social Democratic Party (SPD) Interior Minister Otto Schily, who has declared that new immigrants to Germany are no longer welcome because “maximum capacity has been reached”, play their own role in fomenting racism. Not only such pronouncements, but also state violence against refugees and “unwanted” foreigners is largely ignored by official political circles and the media.

The systematic violence against refugees carried out by the German state apparatus is one aspect of the policies of the European Union, which find their most violent expression on the borders of Germany, particularly those separating Germany from Poland and the Czech Republic. German authorities are especially brutal in the measures they employ before and during deportations.

The message communicated by the anti-refugee actions of the German state reinforces the neo-Nazi calumny that the lives of “unwanted” foreigners are worthless. According to a document presented by the Anti-Racist Initiative of Berlin (ARI), over the past seven years 239 refugees have lost their lives as a result of state actions—a higher death toll than that resulting from racist attacks in Germany over the same period.

Based on the Shengen agreement reached in 1991, the states of the European Union have erected a system to make the frontiers of the EU as impenetrable as possible. Seven years ago the Christian Democratic Union-Christian Social Union coalition government

under Helmut Kohl passed the “third state regulation”, which allows for the rejection of refugees who come to Germany via a so-called “safe third state”.

On the basis of this provision, the countries to the east of the borders of the European Union, since they are considered to be “safe” third states, serve as a *cordon sanitaire* for the EU. Thus every refugee who reaches Germany by land is automatically an illegal refugee.

During the Cold War the West held up the “iron curtain” as a symbol of repression, blocking people from travelling freely. But today it is German border patrols, with the aid of modern technologies and packs of tracker dogs, that prevent refugees from coming into the country.

A recent report by the German television magazine *Monitor*, under the title “Bundesgrenzschutz (BGS—federal border patrol): Hunting scenes on the German-Polish border”, threw some light on the injuries inflicted on refugees by border patrol dogs, as well as the humiliating treatment they experience at the hands of the BGS. According to official government figures, between 1997 and 1999 43 people were injured by police dogs.

A direct consequence of the border regime is the death of refugees who, lacking the legal sanction to come to Germany, attempt to cross the Oder or Neisse rivers. The figures published in the ARI document, based on statements made by the BGS to the press, show that in the period 1993-2000, 119 people died attempting to reach Germany, 89 of whom lost their lives on the eastern border. Most of them drowned, others died from exposure, heart attacks or traffic accidents while trying to escape the police.

The real figure of those drowned is presumed to be much higher, as only those victims are counted who are

washed up on the German side of the rivers. The daily paper *Tageszeitung* reported that it was common practice in the communities that live directly on the border to push bodies washed up on their banks back into the river so as to save the cost of holding a funeral or returning the corpse.

For those refugees who, despite all the countermeasures, manage to reach Germany and apply for asylum, their stay in Germany often ends in prison followed by deportation. The vast majority of refugees can expect to have their application to stay rejected. Most are denied a probationary period to remain in the country and are asked to leave “voluntarily”. If officials believe such refugees might attempt to go into hiding, they are routinely imprisoned.

Although these people have committed no crime, the conditions of their imprisonment do not differ from those of criminals. They are denied all but the most minimal contact with the outside world, and are severely restricted in their ability to receive visitors or exercise their rights.

Several people usually share one small cell (three people in a 12-square-metre space), and are allowed out of their cell for only one hour of yard exercise a day. Refugees are usually imprisoned for three months, but their term can be extended. Some are imprisoned for up to 18 months.

Over the past seven years, 92 people have committed suicide or died while attempting to avoid deportation. During this period, according to ARI, at least 310 refugees, out of panic and desperation, or to protest their deportation, attempted to kill or injure themselves, but survived. Of these, 214 were imprisoned at the time.

Asked about the attempted suicide of an Angolan woman, the head of the immigration office in Chemnitz stated that attempted suicides, especially by refugees from African countries, were not unusual, and that nearly every second deportation was accompanied by such an attempt.

In order to carry through deportations and break the resistance of refugees, BGS officers often maltreat people by tying them up and gagging them, or sedating them with drugs against their will. Such scandalous methods are only mentioned by the media when a refugee is killed in the course of deportation. This was the case in 1999 when Aamir Ageep, a 30-year-old

Mozambican, suffocated while he was being deported, after BGS officers had bound him, put a motorcycle helmet on his head and forced his head between his knees.

Often pilots refuse to take refugees due to be deported on board when they vehemently try to defend themselves or are not transportable because of injuries. A Lufthansa captain told the broadcasting station *Hessischer Rundfunk*: “A Nigerian lay on his back in front of the rear stairs. His eyes were wide open and his trousers were pushed down following a struggle. A BGS officer knelt on the Nigerian's chest and wrapped him up with adhesive tape. Only the man's nose was free so that he could breathe. There was blood on the tape. His legs were wrapped with tape, as were his feet and thighs, from top to bottom, as if he were a carpet made ready for transport.”

In the period from 1993 to 1999, five refugees died while being deported and at least 159 people were injured through maltreatment and compulsory measures.

The fate of deportees upon returning to their countries of origin remains for the most part unknown. German officialdom could not care less what happens to those who have fallen victim to their restrictive policies. Only this much is known: 13 people lost their lives after being deported. Another 276 were maltreated and tortured by police or military forces in their respective countries of origin, and at least 46 people vanished without a trace following deportation.



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