

Germany: Increase in extremist right-wing violence

Martin Kreickenbaum
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Last year again saw more extreme-right-wing motivated crimes in Germany than the year before. Provisional figures for 2002 provided by the Interior Ministry record 10,579 extremist right-wing offences, compared with 10,054 for 2001—a rise of 5 percent. The number of acts of violence also rose from 709 to 725, as Sebastian Edathy (SPD) admitted in mid-February during a debate in the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) over the financing of programmes directed against right-wing extremism.

These were “minimum figures”, according to Edathy, since numerous supplementary reports from the different *Länder* (states) were yet to be included. The rise compared with 2001 could thus still increase dramatically.

In the first five months of 2001 over 1,000 crimes with an extremist right-wing background were recorded. This number rose continuously between September and December 2001 to approximately 350 offences per month. This compares with an average of almost 900 similar offences per month in 2002, a rise of over 150 percent compared with the last four months of 2001.

This clear increase is even more surprising, since the Interior Ministry had announced a decrease in extremist right-wing crime at the beginning of January. At that time, only some 3,700 such offences were recorded for the first 10 months of last year, with a further decrease expected for the year as a whole. These hopes were fuelled by reports from the *Länder* regarding a significant lowering in the number of crimes involving right-wing violence. This was ascribed to “intensive control and monitoring” as well as the banning of various associations and to the pressure of “high levels of investigations and crime clear-ups”.

By the end of January, Joerg Schoenbohm, the state interior minister in Brandenburg, was already backpedaling when the statistics for the state were published showing an increase in extremist right-wing crime of over 8 percent against the previous year. In addition, the clear-

up rate for these offences fell in Brandenburg to only 39 percent, far lower than for other types of crime.

How is the discrepancy between the most recent figures and those announced at the beginning of the year to be explained? Commonly, it is said that the figures contained in the annual statistics are traditionally higher than the cumulative monthly figures, since a right-wing motive for a crime can often only be determined in retrospect.

More importantly, however, is the fact that the federal and state governments are clearly endeavouring to play down the level of right-wing violence. Thus, the number of fatalities due to right-wing violence since German reunification in 1990 is officially cited as 39. Journalists from the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and *Tagesspiegel* launched their own investigations three years ago and have documented 99 cases since 1990 in which people were killed for right-wing motives.

At the beginning of the year the Interior Ministry announced, “No homicide in 2002 occurred as a result of an extremist criminal offence”. This is contradicted by the documentation provided by the journalists. In summer 2002, in the Brandenburg town of Potzlow, 17-year-old Marinus Schoeberl was abused by three right-wing extremists who called him a “Jew” and beat him to death because he had coloured his hair blond and wore flared trousers. The case is not officially regarded as a right-wing motivated offence.

One year earlier in Saxony-Anhalt, pensioner Willi Worg was murdered. This crime was considered as robbery with murder, and the prosecutors excluded a right-wing extremist background. Only when the 19-year-old culprit tattooed a swastika on his stomach while being held on remand did the prosecution change its opinion.

In order to massage the statistics the definition of extremist criminal offences was changed. Until the end of 2000, criminal offences were classified as extremist if the culprit’s motivation was to “destroy free democratic

constitutional structures". Since the term extremism remained very vague, resulting in differences in the recording of such offences between the different *Länder*, the Federal Bureau of Criminal Investigation set up a "working group on terminology". After months-long consultation, a new definition of an extremist criminal offence was arrived at, effective since January 2001—the key phrase being "political motivated crime" (PMC).

The division into PMC right-wing, PMC left-wing and politically motivated crime committed by foreigners was said to extend the categories under which such offences could be recorded statistically, since the old criterion of "destroying free democratic constitutional structures" no longer applied, meaning any political motivation as a background to a criminal offence was sufficient for data collection purposes. Since the term "extremism" was not abolished, but used as a subcategory of PMC, the authorities have been given even greater room for manoeuvre to register right-wing criminal offences differently—as right-wing politically motivated crime, as right-wing extremist or also as a criminal offence without any political background.

The authorities frequently exploit this situation. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, no right-wing violence was recorded in 2001 at all, although the state had always been high up in the statistics for the size of its population. Acts of right-wing violence were simply registered as "only" right-wing. In Brandenburg, several attacks by right-wing extremists on "left-wing" looking young people were minimised by the police, who labelled them "non-political clique rivalries".

The murder of a refugee, overheard speaking Russian, in the Brandenburg town of Wittstock in May last year and the above mentioned murder in July of the young man in Uckermark, also in Brandenburg, only appeared as a "footnote" in the report of the state Interior Ministry, but were not recorded as acts of right-wing violence.

The fact that right-wing, racist violence is more marked in East Germany, even though the number of foreigners as a proportion of the population there is infinitesimally small, clearly reveals the link to the social crisis. Officially in East Germany unemployment is approximately twice as high as in the West. In some regions nearly one in three people are unemployed, although a large part of the working-age population has moved away. In many places, the lack of apprenticeship places makes the situation even more hopeless for young people.

However, a social crisis does not lead automatically to

the strengthening of right-wing political tendencies. It can also lead to a broader solidarity from below and so prepare a social change. The concentrated appearance of the extreme right in East Germany therefore has other, specific reasons, which have to be found in the history of the GDR. Behind the façade of anti-fascism and "proletarian internationalism", the Stalinist ruling party not only propagated naked nationalism, but above all ensured that every independent movement of the working class was suppressed and suffocated.

Moreover, all the parties, also those calling themselves a "left-wing opposition" like the Party of Democratic Socialism, wherever they exercise political influence and power act against the interests of the population and implement increasingly worse cuts in all social spheres.

Thus in view of the confusion about Stalinism, increasing despair and hopelessness lead to the fact that the search for a radical way out of the social crisis takes on, to some extent, reactionary, right-wing forms.

Moreover, right-wing extremist ideas are encouraged by an official, state racism. Federal Interior Minister Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party) declares that Germany has exceeded the "limit of its capacity" as far as immigrants are concerned, while his friend and Bavarian state Interior Minister Beckstein (Christian Social Union) divides foreigners into those who are economically useful and those who are "without use". The "fight against illegal immigration" criminalises all foreigners, and at the same time, most elementary democratic and social rights are being systematically withheld from asylum-seekers and refugees. Such rhetoric and policies can only be regarded by the extremist right as giving approval to their own xenophobia and racism.



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