

Does criticism lead to violence?-a comment on the Brandenburg intelligence service slander of the German SEP

Rolf Gössner
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On September 16, 2003, the Brandenburg intelligence service (Verfassungsschutz) seized on an attack on the immigration office in the town of Frankfurt-Oder to accuse the World Socialist Web Site of promoting violence and being part of a milieu of violent “left extremism.” Mr. Gössner’s article addresses this subject.

Imagine—unknown persons in Brandenburg firebomb one of these efficient “labour agencies,” for example, in the town of Potsdam. At the scene of the crime, the police find a copy of an article from *Ossietzky*, written by Otto Meyer and bearing the title “Schröder shreds the welfare state.” The article is a critical analysis of welfare policy—or better the dismantling of welfare—carried out by the social democratic-led government, and its shabby treatment of the unemployed. Apart from this article the police find no other written material.

But then, the next day, an article appears on the web site of the Brandenburg intelligence service (Verfassungsschutz—VS) dealing with the attack and making the *Ossietzky* article the key element for the following argument: “The article found at the scene of the crime ranked alongside a number of similar publications that taken together promote or produce a propensity for violence. The road to criminal acts is paved with such texts.”

This case is no invention, but, in fact, German reality. The attack did not take place against the employment agency in Potsdam but against immigration offices in the town of Frankfurt-Oder. There it was not a case of firebombing; instead, during the night of September 15, 2003, unknown culprits broke windows, shook a foul-smelling liquid into the building, stuffed the outside locks of the buildings doors with glue and sprayed slogans. At the scene of the deed, rather than an *Ossietzky* article, they, according to the police, left without commentary a copy of an article on refugee policy that appeared in February 2001 on the *World Socialist Web Site* of

the Socialist Equality Party (<http://www.wsws.de>). This party propounds a socialist policy and defends democratic and social rights. The title of the article in question is “The deadly consequences of Germany’s refugee policy”(February 24, 2001; March 8, 2001, in English). The author is not Otto Meyer, but rather Lena Sokoll. The intelligence service, however, is the same: section V of the Interior Ministry of the State of Brandenburg (Verfassungsschutz).

The article by Lena Sokoll is a critical analysis of the refugee policy of the German government (<http://wsws.org/de/2001/feb2001/ausl-f24.shtml>). It criticises the conditions prevailing at German and European borders, details the number of victims arising from the exclusion policy directed against refugees, and describes the practice of deportation that has resulted in injuries for many, and in some cases death. This criticism is shared by refugee initiatives and human rights organisations.

Just a few hours after the attack in Frankfurt-Oder, the VS published on its homepage—available to all Internet users—a contribution that was full of slanders and insinuations. The discovery of the *wsws.de* article at the scene of the crime was, for the anonymous VS authors, proof of the “left-wing extremist background to the act” and “connections between the culprits and the milieu of left-wing extremism.” In the first place, however, they undertake an analysis of the text. The author charges the immigration authorities, as well as the German border police and civil police, with dealing “with refugees and foreigners in a contemptuous fashion.” She accuses the military police of preventing refugees from entering into Germany in the first place. The practice of deportation, according to the intelligence service, is also depicted in a very critical fashion. Finally, the author maintains that victims of such practices have been repeatedly injured or have even died. The intelligence service treats these claims as if they were a product of leftwing fantasy.

The VS authors, however, don’t restrict themselves to feigned naivety. They insinuate that the author is “sceptical whether the fight against right-wing extremism by state authorities is really serious.” According to the VS, the author

intimates “that the state and right-wing extremists are hand-in-glove”—a conclusion, in fact, which any discriminating reader will not find in said article. Certainly not from the sentence that can be the only basis for their conclusion: “The message communicated by the anti-refugee actions of the German state demonstrates to the neo-Nazis that the lives of ‘unwanted’ foreigners are worthless.” To demonstrate something to somebody means precisely not to be “hand-in-glove” with him.

Furthermore, the VS turns to the issue of the “type of argument used by left extremists” in relation to said article. “The claim that the immigration policy of the German government can be compared to right-wing agitation against foreigners” is to be found in “many left-extremist publications.” What they really mean to say is that, therefore all those who make such a claim must be left-wing extremists—a “logic” used frequently in the fifties and sixties by West German courts in their persecution of communists.

According to the VS, left-extremist publications argue that the “state through its actions directly encourages right-wing extremists to become active against foreigners and refugees.” In contrast, in her article, Lena Sokoll writes that “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.” Since the dismantling of the right to asylum law and the instrumentalisation of the debate over immigration, human rights activists have repeatedly warned of such possible consequences.

Only at this point does the VS author attempt to relativise his previous claims somewhat: “One could not impute that the author was directly responsible for the attack in Frankfurt (Oder). Legally, there is no case to be made against her.” Generously, the VS author declines to make the author “directly” responsible—but certainly indirectly. After all, at the present time, refugee policy is “one of the main themes of potentially violent left extremists,” who legitimise “violence directed against objects and persons on the basis of precisely this argument.” What the VS is saying here is that those who take up and deal with such a theme in a critical manner are not directly guilty of a punishable offence, but they do play into the hands of violent elements and are therefore intellectually responsible for what takes place. “The article found at the scene of the crime ranked alongside a number of similar publications, which taken together promote or produce a propensity for violence. The road to criminal acts is paved with such texts.”

The VS treatise culminates with this slanderous sentence.

The Socialist Equality Party has defended itself against this campaign of defamation by the secret services and has demanded that the intelligence authorities immediately delete the incorrect and discriminating passages. The VS is acting illegally when it publicly categorises the article and its author as “left extremist,” defames her as encouraging violence and

then claims intellectual responsibility. With this public statement of disrepute, the VS is abusing its authority to inform the public. Such actions by a state institution cannot be accepted by any author, party or anyone responsible for a web site

The head of the VS authority in Brandenburg (Heiner) Wegesin, answers casually, and without the least sense of having done any wrong: he could see nothing in the VS contribution that amounts to a defamatory or incorrect statement of fact, or any action that in any way could be regarded as illegal. Therefore, the text would not be removed. The authority would “calmly await” any further countermeasures. The letter ends with the veiled threat: “Also, the insinuation that the Brandenburg intelligence agency has expressed itself on its web site in a slanderous manner could have legal consequences.”

Before the injured party could raise charges against the VS, it emerged that the publication by the VS no longer appears on its web site. The VS has justified this step with technical “changes” to the web site and argued that no admission of guilt should be drawn from this move. The VS continues to maintain that the text provides no cause for complaint.

With the line of argument raised by the VS, any critical author whose text could be misused and associated with an act of violence could be subject to further improper use by the VS. This approach shifts any sort of firm criticism of state policy, any severe criticism of the activity of the government, into the orbit of encouragement and support for illegal activities and violence. The classification of the article as “left extremist” and in the final analysis a relevant cause for an attack is arbitrary and improper. It interferes with the constitutional right of the author, the party and its officials; it is an attack on the rights of personal freedom, on the right of free speech and a free press, and on the right of parties to organise. One wonders whether the official defenders of the constitution (“Office for protection of the constitution” is the official name of the intelligence service) have ever taken a look at the constitution they are supposed to be protecting!

Dr. Rolf Gössner, attorney and author, is president of the “International League for Human Rights” and joint publisher of Ossietzky. Together with attorney Sönke Hilbrans, he represented the Socialist Equality Party against the Brandenburg VS. His most recent publication is Geheime Informanten. V-Leute des Verfassungsschutzes: Kriminelle im Dienst des Staates (Knaur-Verlag, München 2003). Internet: <http://www.rolf-goessner.de>; <http://www.ilmr.de>



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