

German police officer accused of torturing refugees

Verena Nees
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The pictures inevitably recall the most disturbing images from Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. But this time they come from the German city of Hannover.

A police officer has been accused of abuse in Hannover, allegedly having tortured refugees in holding cells. According to research by regional broadcaster NDR, there were at least two cases of abuse. They allegedly took place at the holding cells of the federal police at Hannover's main train station in 2014.

The victim, a 29-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, had no passport when he was checked in March 2014 and was therefore taken into custody at the train station. His treatment was described in a message written by the officer to police colleagues using the Whatsapp messaging service: “[I] have put him away. An Afghan. With a travel ban. Stuck my finger in his nose. And poked. Was funny. And dragged by the bound feet through the cell. That was nice. Squealed like a pig. That was a present from Allah.”

The second case involved a 19-year-old Moroccan from Tangiers. He was detained by the federal police in Hannover, according to NDR, because he was travelling in a train without a ticket. The officers allegedly found marijuana in his socks.

The Moroccan teen also ended up in the Hannover holding cells where he was humiliated by the police, held on the floor and forced to eat rancid pork.

The evidence of this was provided by the accused officer who presented a mobile phone picture. It shows a man lying on the floor in an unnatural position, the hands secured by handcuffs and the face distorted in pain. It appears as though the man was held down by two policemen, as the tips of their boots can be seen in the picture.

In the text message cited by NDR, it states, “This is a

Moroccan, I turned him white. XY [the immediate superior] said that he heard him upstairs, and that he had squealed like a pig. Then the bastard ate the rest of the rotten pork from the fridge like an animal from the floor.”

A colleague described the incident: “He got the rancid pork from the fridge. It was the leftovers of our breakfast at the weekend. The food was green, so obviously off. As he got it, he said he wanted to do something good, because he was a friend of humanity. His tone made clear that he meant this ironically. And then we were asked to leave the room. I assume that he actually gave him the ground pork.”

The Hannover state prosecutor is investigating initial suspicion of bodily harm by a police officer on duty and the breach of the arms law, after two unnamed individuals filed complaints against the officer. They were not associated with the victim and are likely fellow police officers. The accusers in any case are well-informed, and knew about the messages.

During a search of the service quarters of the accused officer, as well as his private home on Friday, an illegal weapon was found, according to senior state prosecutor Klinge. As the two complainants asserted, the man held his service weapon to the temple of a colleague in 2013 and demanded that he perform sexual acts. Five other officers allegedly witnessed the incident. There had been a number of other occasions in the police department when weapons were turned on colleagues, an insider told NDR.

The facts revealed thus far have produced horror across the country. Holger Nitz, from the Lower Saxony association of criminal defence lawyers stated in an NDR report on Monday that the incidents bordered on torture and recalled “grim associations” and he was “reminded of “very grim times.”

The refugee organisation ProAsyl declared that the incidents displayed a horrifying degree of racism and inhumanity. ProAsyl director Günter Burkhardt called for criminal prosecutions, including the prosecution of those who potentially knew about the incidents. “The scandal within the scandal is the inactivity of those in police uniforms who knew what was happening,” said Burkhardt.

By contrast, officials from the police trade union (GdP) and politicians from the Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) described the scandal as a one-off event. “Even such a shocking isolated incident on this scale cannot be allowed to fundamentally challenge the work of the police and how they deal with people in custody,” noted GdP head Oliver Malchow stated.

Former GdP leader Rainer Wendt also defended the police. The abuse only “involved isolated black sheep,” Wendt claimed in the Passauer Neuen Press. He went on to assert that the federal police showed a high degree of intercultural competence in their dealings with refugees. Wendt also used the incident to call for the strengthening of the police with more personnel and facilities.

In reality, the torture practiced by the federal police in Hannover is only the high point of a growing number of incidents in which police have abused refugees.

The abuse of refugees at a centre in North Rhein-Westphalia was made public last autumn. The residents were systematically humiliated and tortured by employees of a private security firm. In this case also, representatives of all the political parties sought to present it as an exceptional case. It was claimed that problem was the private security services, within which individual criminals had developed. While the police investigated the security firm Burbach, it was revealed that the police had previously known about the abuses taking place at the facility.

The mistreatment of refugees now extends to the police themselves. The sadism of the police officer and his possible accomplices is shocking. Even more horrifying is his open sharing of his acts with his colleagues over Whatsapp and in text messages. Obviously the perpetrator believed that many of his colleagues would approve of such torture practices against refugees.

These anti-social attitudes are being encouraged by a

political climate of agitation against refugees and hostility towards Muslims promoted by the German government and the European Union. The suspension of rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea last year resulted in the horrifying deaths of around 2,000 refugees within a few days. Now they are responding by proceeding with military operations to stem the flow of refugees.

At the same time, the abuses are a warning sign of changes within the state apparatus. In 2002, the use of the threat of torture to extract a confession in the kidnapping of a banker’s son provoked a month-long public debate about the legitimacy of torture, which was promoted by many. The WSWS warned at the time of a step in the direction of a police state. Ultimately, a series of court rulings, the last in 2012, confirmed the ban on torture and issued a symbolic fine to the state of Hesse which employed the officers.

The current incidents involving the federal police in Hannover, based on what is already known, make clear that in spite of an official ban, torture has established itself as a routine part of police activity behind the backs of the population. While refugees fleeing from the wars in the Middle East and North Africa are the immediate target for torture, such practices are aimed ultimately at the working class and will be deployed to suppress social opposition to militarism, war and the growing assault on social rights.



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