

# German president stirs up public opinion against refugees

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Earlier this month Chancellor Angela Merkel feigned compassion for refugees, and thus, at least superficially, adapted to the great popular willingness to help and the many public expressions of solidarity with refugees. Now leading politicians and the media are conducting an aggressive campaign to overturn this mood and shift public opinion in an openly xenophobic direction.

In recent weeks, hardly a day goes by without a leading German daily newspaper or influential politician or academic stirring up hatred against refugees. While the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) blusters about the “threatened homeland” and *Die Welt* declares that “refugees are not automatically citizens”, Humboldt University professors demand that “these be made into Germans” (Herfried Münkler), and that there be an end to “talk of a welcoming culture” (Jörg Baberowski).

One of the recent peaks of this campaign was undoubtedly the jubilee reception for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán organised by Bavaria’s ruling Christian Social Union and its chairman Horst Seehofer at the party’s meeting in Kloster Banz early last week (see: German ruling party lauds Hungarian premier Orbán). Like no other, Orbán stands in Europe for a restrictive and brutal refugee policy, which includes raising barbed wire fences, mass deportations and the use of the military and fascist thugs against refugees.

One person was missing, however, in order to give this inhuman campaign pastoral approval and prepare the population for the implementation of a savage anti-refugee policy: the German president and former clergyman Joachim Gauck.

On Sunday it was time. Gauck spoke at the opening of the 40th Inter-cultural Weeks of the Churches in the cathedral at Mainz. It is hard to say what was more repulsive: the crude smear campaigns of a Seehofer or

Orbán, or the moralizing sermons of the incumbent president, who, as always, sought to garnish his reactionary agenda with a few phrases about “humanity”, “tolerance”, “help”, and even the “lessons of the horrors of the Nazi era.”

Here are some examples of Gauck’s “refugee love” which, the longer he spoke, changed into Old Testament hatred, apocalyptic prophecies and direct threats against refugees:

\* “We want to help. Our heart is open. But our options are limited.”

\* “Our asylum and refugee law asks each one only whether the conditions for granting protection are present. It is not measured by numbers. And yet we know that our capacity is limited, even if it has not yet been negotiated where the borders lie.”

\* “When people come to us in their hundreds of thousands, from a distant land with a foreign culture, often with all their possessions in a plastic bag, then the people come with challenges—and, yes, even conflicts. That is completely unavoidable.”

\* “Even the greatest imagination, even large financial resources will not be enough to avert conflicts entirely. During these weeks, and in the foreseeable future, fewer homes will probably be completed as people come. Competition for housing, particularly affordable housing, is likely to be inevitable. It is uncertain whether we will be able to offer sufficient places in daycare centres or schools everywhere at once.”

Gauck threatened the “fundamentalists, anti-Semites and other ideologues” among the refugees, who allegedly “want to continue their home-grown conflicts on German soil.” He declared: “We don’t want any religious fanaticism in this country. So-called holy warriors need to know, the rule of law does not condone violence. It will consistently pursue the

perpetrators.”

Finally, he told the politicians and spiritual leaders present, including Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, chairman of the German Evangelical Church Council, and Cardinal Reinhard Marx, chairman of the German Bishops’ Conference: “Even unpopular decisions and uncomfortable steps will be necessary.” Among these were that “states and a union of states like the European Union [must] protect their outer borders”. Only in this way were “the core tasks of a state polity met: the maintenance of internal order and ultimately of inner peace.”

The mainstream media for the most part acclaimed these essentially right-wing fortress-Europe and law-and-order policies delivered by the priestly statesman. Gauck had “spoken inconvenient truths” (FAZ) and “struck away from Merkel’s refugee course,” said *Die Zeit*.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented: “What the head of state presented to the internationally open church people, would in times of war have been called a blood, sweat and tears speech.” The message of the president runs: “People, dress up warm and get ready for conflicts, conflicts over resources, possibly also for the defence of democratic values.”

Above all, the comparison with the “blood, sweat and tears” speech which Winston Churchill used during the Second World War to commit Britain to the hardships and sufferings of the struggle against Nazi Germany, illustrates what the German elites value in their president and also what they expect from him in the future.

It is now nearly two years since Gauck’s infamous speech on the Day of German Unity on October 3, 2013. At that time, he demanded that Germany should again play a role “in Europe and in the world” that actually corresponds to its size and influence. “In a world full of crises and upheavals,” Gauck had declared, we should “not give ourselves the illusion that we could be spared from political and economic and military conflicts, if we do not participate in their solution.”

Gauck now regards the refugee crisis, brought about by the Western war policy, as an opportunity to continue this course. In the cathedral at Mainz he said cynically, “Persecution, war and civil war are not just history, no, they are present. They drive people to flee,

and that is what we are experiencing now. We see that we really have to fight the causes of flight much more intensively and that we are not always able to do so.”

It remains to be seen whether on the 25th anniversary of German unification, Gauck goes a step further and delivers a war speech in the name of the “fight against the causes of flight.” His latest sermon has already made one thing clear: The ruling elite is reacting to the growing gulf between itself and the population with an aggressive counter-offensive, aimed not only against refugees, but ultimately against the entire working class.



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