

Violent attacks on refugees increase in Germany

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The number of acts of violence against refugees in Germany rose precipitously in 2015, according to media accounts and independent reports published in recent weeks.

Meanwhile, politicians and parties both in and outside the government have engaged in a cynical effort to downplay and legitimise the fascistic elements behind these attacks as “concerned citizens”.

Criminal prosecution authorities have also contributed to this effort. They refuse to recognise politically motivated crimes by right-wingers and prosecute them as such. The most egregious crimes are systematically declared to be mere misdemeanors.

The president of the church organization Diakonie, Ulrich Lilie, spoke to the *Zeit* newspaper about the “worst wave of racist and right-wing extremist violence in 20 years.” Bernd Wagner, founder of Exit, an anti-fascist organisation that provides counselling for former neo-Nazis, told the *Zeit*, “Something is brewing that could soon lead to fatalities.”

According to the *Zeit*, there have already been 222 attacks on refugee lodgings this year. The perpetrators have thrown paving stones and Molotov cocktails, have detonated explosive devices and set fires or flooded lodgings. Ninety-three of the 222 attacks were arson. In all cases, the residents were either injured or were in immediate danger. Sometimes right-wing extremists entered refugee housing under a false pretext and attacked residents.

In an especially egregious case in Massow, in the state of Brandenburg, the perpetrator attacked 35 refugees with pepper spray after participating in a party at local refugee lodgings. According to the state attorney, the man claimed he had nothing against foreigners, only against so-called “economic refugees.”

According to the Federal Interior Ministry, a total of 747 crimes against asylum lodgings have been registered

this year—that is, on average, more than two xenophobic crimes per day. This includes vandalism, xenophobic propaganda offenses, hate speech and other violations of the law. According to a report in the news magazine *Frontal 21*, which based itself on the Interior Ministry statement, the attacks are concentrated in the states of North Rhine-Westphalia (155), Lower Saxony (68), Saxony (66) and Saxony-Anhalt (40).

The actual number of attacks is no doubt much higher. There is a striking contrast between the report in the *Zeit*, according to which there were 222 attacks on refugee lodgings, and the report from the Interior Ministry, which claims only 120 direct violent attacks took place.

Research performed by North German Broadcasting, West German Broadcasting and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* last summer suggests that this whitewashing is systematic. Many crimes reported to the Federal Interior Ministry by the states in 2014 do not appear in its report at all. These discrepancies could be traced back to the results of further investigation, which suggested mere accidents instead of actual crimes. A joint list compiled by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation and the human rights organisation Pro Asyl reports a large number of additional crimes that are not mentioned by the authorities.

The research of *Frontal 21* and the *Zeit* suggests that the authorities investigating right-wing violence systematically downplay and even defend it.

Frontal 21 noted the attacks on asylum lodgings in Tröglitz (in Saxony-Anhalt) and Altena (in North Rhine-Westphalia). The attack in Tröglitz was reported as a serious arson attack in criminal statistics, but not as a politically motivated crime.

In the case of the refugee lodgings in Altena, the perpetrators knew that refugees were staying there when they set the building on fire. The local residents who warmly took in the refugees were indignant. Nevertheless, the attorney general defended the attackers and

determined that they were only guilty of arson, not attempted murder. In justification, the authorities told *Frontal 21* that the perpetrators “let it be known that they did not want to harm or kill people living on the ground floor.”

In only four of the 222 attacks on refugee lodgings were the perpetrators punished for their crimes. In eight additional cases, charges were brought against the attackers. One of the arsonists in Altena who admitted to his crime is now at large again.

According to a column published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on Tuesday, eight people who attacked a Turkish food stand in Munich with knives, hammers and baseball bats, injured two people out of obviously right-wing radical motives. They were questioned for the first time four days later, although they had already been identified on the day the attack took place. Prosecutors ignored the fact that the offenders brought a deadly weapon. “Just because someone brings a knife with him doesn’t mean he is attempting to kill someone,” explained the attorney general.

A young anti-fascist, who held a flag in his hand at an anti-Pegida demonstration was judged according to a different standard. The police viewed his flag as a weapon, although he did not use it as one. He was investigated for two months and sentenced to nine months imprisonment with parole, because he had also “stolen” food that had been thrown away.

The fact that many perpetrators who attack refugee lodgings had previously not attracted notice as right-wing extremists is no accident. The deeply biased reporting and the open hate propaganda of numerous media outlets and politicians in government, as well as the behaviour of the investigating authorities, who are deeply enmeshed in the neo-Nazi scene, have sent a signal that has emboldened the most right-wing elements.

The terror attacks in Paris on November 13 came at just the right time for certain sections of the media, which have responded by calling for a crackdown on refugees and the closing of German borders. They claim there are terrorists among the refugees who have come to Germany in order to perpetrate attacks. Since then, it has become clear that almost all the assassins in France were born in the country and had been watched closely by the French authorities long before the attacks.

In *die Welt*, Mathias Döpfner demanded a “radicalization of the social middle” and designated “the refugee crisis and now the wave of terror in Paris” as a “fire starter for the cultural struggle”. He said that a new

immigration law that “consistently deports economic refugees and immigrants coming from [so-called] safe third countries”, and that deports everyone “who ignores the rules of our constitutional state” is part of the defence of “our values”.

Furthermore, leading government politicians have provided grist for the mill of right-wing groupings, such as the self-styled “Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West” (Pegida), by describing its far-right supporters as “concerned citizens”.

Vice Chancellor and Social Democratic Party President Sigmar Gabriel met with Pegida supporters at the Saxony Centre for Political Education (SLpB) on January 23. Four days prior to this, Pegida founders Lutz Bachmann and Kathrin Oertel spread right-wing hate at the invitation of SLpB head Frank Richter, who shared the podium with them. At that point, an investigation of Bachmann was already underway because of comments he had made on his Facebook page to the effect that foreigners were “brutes”, “scum” and “filth”.

In his comments to *Frontal 21*, Gabriel now protests his innocence. In answer to the question whether his visit to the SLpB was, in retrospect, a mistake, he said, “What we see today are open right-wing radicals who have nothing to do with those who met at that time in the Centre for Political Education.” In answer to the objection of the reporter that one could have seen what Pegida stands for, Gabriel replied, “If you knew all that, you are indeed smarter than me...”

In the news magazine report, CDU Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière was asked whether he regretted that he had “shown sympathy for Pegida a year ago”. De Maizière answered that his evaluation of Pegida has “changed”. However, it remains “right that citizens with concerns be taken seriously.”



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