

Prominent German journalist attacks refugees in the New York Times

Johannes Stern
20 January 2016

Last weekend, the *New York Times* published a vile commentary by Jochen Bittner entitled "Can Germany Be Honest About Its Refugee Problems?" In the article, Bittner, a regular contributor to the German weekly *Die Zeit* who also writes for the *Times*, calls for tougher action against refugees.

Bittner demands that German Chancellor Angela Merkel admit that she underestimated what he calls the "refugee problem" in Germany, declaring that "potentially thousands of these men are criminals, with no other goal than to rob and betray their hosts."

Among Bittner's demands are the mass arrest and deportation of refugees. He writes: "First, find a way to separate the free-riders and criminals from the refugees... Then we need to deport those who have no right to stay, quickly and visibly... Finally, we have to be willing to intern those who arrive without passports."

In order to legitimise anti-refugee measures that recall those carried out by the Nazis against Jews in the 1930s, Bittner describes the events on New Year's Eve in Cologne, Germany as a "horror" and paints a scenario in which hundreds of immigrants, totally out of control, sexually harassed German women.

Bittner writes: "More than 650 criminal complaints have been filed by women in Cologne regarding that night, and more than 150 in Hamburg, including two cases of rape. A 28-year-old woman named Katja said: 'Suddenly I felt a hand on my bum, on my breasts, I was grabbed everywhere, it was horrific. I was desperate, it was like running the gauntlet. Over the space of 200 meters, I think I must have been touched about 100 times.' Of the 50 suspects identified in Cologne, the bulk are from northern Africa, mostly from Morocco. These are uncomfortable facts."

It is necessary to look more closely at the "facts" that have been disseminated so eagerly by the German and international media in order to whip up a racist campaign against millions of immigrants and Muslims and shift the political agenda further to the right. It is not a matter of asserting that nothing of significance happened in Cologne

on New Year's Eve. But precisely because of the massive political campaign being waged around this event, it is necessary to take nothing propagated by the media at face value and carefully check all the facts.

It is first of all necessary to note that almost three weeks after the event, it remains completely unclear what really happened on New Year's Eve in Cologne.

Due to a lack of evidence, most of the criminal charges lodged with the police have been dropped. There is no reliable evidence of mass sexual assault and no evidence that what took place in Cologne exceeds what regrettably takes place on a regular basis at major gatherings in Germany where large amounts of alcohol are consumed.

Even the bourgeois media, which is so keen to participate in the smear campaign against migrants, has been forced to admit this.

On January 17, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* wrote: "Given the slim evidence, any conclusions are premature. Investigators are still interrogating victims and witnesses and analysing mobile phone data and video material. Cologne has listed up to now 13 culprits, all from North Africa, none of whom are linked to sexual offenses... Hamburg has now identified at least eight suspects who can be linked to sexual assault—including refugees as well as men who 'have lived in the city for several years.' Whatever that means."

On January 6, *Die Zeit*, the newspaper for which Bittner regularly writes, ran an article with the title "When assumptions become facts," which warned that "alleged facts could be distorted" in reporting on Cologne and cautioned that "nothing has been proved." The article argued that "when the situation is not clear," journalists should "not spread speculation, conjecture and prejudices," and added that it was important "to separate fact from allegations."

This warning has not prevented the German media, including the major dailies and weekly newspapers, from publishing racist covers and graphics and unleashing a xenophobic campaign unparalleled in Germany since the collapse of the Nazis.

While the political thrust of this campaign is clear, there are a number of articles suggesting that many of the reports and videos relating to the alleged sexual assault of women by immigrants in Cologne are fictitious. On Monday the tabloid *Bild*, which has been full of lurid accounts of the “sex mob in Cologne,” conceded that, in connection with such a “highly emotional issue,” many lies are told. “Reports, photos and even videos were rapidly circulated that had nothing to do with the disgusting sexual assaults in Cologne or were even fictitious,” wrote a certain I. Rakoczy.

Rakoczy mentioned, among other examples, a “video of a blonde woman surrounded and harassed by aggressive Arab men” that supposedly “originated from New Year’s Eve” and was widely spread on Facebook. Now *Bild* writes: “BUT: the video is a fake! In fact, it features scenes from Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, probably from the year 2012.” (It is well known that in Cairo members of the notorious Egyptian Mukhabarat intelligence service organised sexual assaults during mass demonstrations on Tahrir Square in order to discredit the Egyptian revolution.)

While it is difficult amid the din of the propaganda to establish which of the countless stories circulating in the media has any sort of factual basis, Bittner’s account is full of inconsistencies. Even a brief search on the Internet reveals that the “Katja” mentioned by Bittner, a certain Katja L., was already quoted on January 3 in the *Kölner (Cologne) Express*.

Bittner fails to mention two things. First, the *Kölner Express* is not exactly unknown when it comes to false reporting and the presentation of allegations as fact. In November 2007, the German Press Council complained about the newspaper’s breach of the Press Code and its violation of journalistic ethics. The paper had reported on an accident and presented conjectures about the accident as facts.

Bittner is also silent on the fact that the article in the *Köln er Express* contradicts an official report by the Interior Ministry in North Rhine-Westphalia on January 10. The paper reported that “Katja L.” was traveling with another “young woman” and both “ran through this, in part, very aggressive ‘group of men,’” in the course of which the young woman’s “tights and slip were almost completely torn from the body.” She had laid charges with the police on the same night, the newspaper stated.

The report by the Interior Ministry states, however, that on the night of December 31, “police headquarters in Cologne was informed by the police inspection Mitte of a sexual offence affecting three women” on the night of December 31-January 1. It further states: “According to the victims, only their outer garments were touched, and further measures by the criminal police were dispensed with.”

New York Times article, Bittner proposes that the German phrase of the year for 2015, “welcoming culture,” be supplanted by a new “culture of honesty.” To this, one can only respond that under a “culture of honesty” in Germany, someone like Bittner would not be permitted to spread his filth in the *New York Times* and *Die Zeit*. Bittner is not a genuine journalist, but rather a political propagandist who maintains close links to numerous transatlantic, pro-government foundations and think tanks and espouses far-right political objectives in his articles.

Bittner’s connections to foreign policy think tanks and government-affiliated foundations are as deep as his commitment to Germany’s new war policy. Among other engagements, Bittner was European and NATO correspondent for *Die Zeit* from 2007 to 2011, and in 2008 and 2009 he was a participant and reporter for the Brussels Forum, a partner of the German Marshall Fund and the Bertelsmann Foundation.

In an article published in *Zeit Online* in early February 2014 bearing the significant title “Setting Course for the World,” Bittner described in detail the preparation of a new militarist German foreign policy. What he refrained from mentioning was that he was himself a member of the working group that developed the new foreign policy under the heading “New Power: New Responsibilities.”

On November 4, 2013, he penned a programmatic article in the *New York Times* entitled “Rethinking German Pacifism,” in which he argued for a more aggressive German foreign policy. In the commentary, he railed against the “too deeply rooted pacifism” of the German people and called for expanded “military intervention.” His current agitation against refugees serves the same purpose.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact