

German historian calls for harsher measures against refugees

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Under the cover of scholarship, an increasing number of academics and intellectuals are using the media to lend respectability to backward, right-wing conceptions.

This list already includes historian Jörg Baberowski, social scientist Rüdiger Safranski and philosophers Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek, all of whom have promulgated right-wing propaganda in recent months.

Historian Alexander Demandt is the latest to jump on the new “intellectual Freikorps” bandwagon. Demandt, born in Marburg in 1937, is one of the most prominent historians of the ancient world, specializing on the Late Antiquity—the period of transition from the Roman Empire to the Middle Ages. He taught from 1974 to 2005 at the Free University in Berlin and is the author of several scholarly publications on the late antique and beyond.

He is now exploiting his academic discipline to legitimise the media campaign against refugees and Muslims, making use of crude historical analogies to the “Migration Period.”

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article by Demandt in late January under the headline “Downfall of the Roman Empire: End of the Old Order.” The nominal subject was the decline of the Roman Empire. However, Demandt, drawing on the 20th century right-wing German author Oswald Spengler, made use of the topic to comment on the “downfall of the West,” i.e., modern Western, not Roman, civilisation.

In the article, Demandt describes how between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, armed peoples from northern Europe—Goths, Germans and Langobards—invaded the Roman Empire. Rome’s “state monopoly of weapons” was broken, “the power centre” shifted, and “the old order” dissolved.

Demandt concentrates on the mass migration. If one substitutes for “Goths” and “Germans” the terms “Muslims” and “refugees,” and replaces “Roman Empire” with “Germany,” one is left with an appeal for a strong state to keep refugees away from Germany’s borders in order to uphold the nation’s power and defend its cultural identity. Under the guise of scholarly commentary, one encounters a piece of right-wing political agitation in which the Migration Period is used as a foil for the current refugee crisis.

The narrative begins in 376 CE, when the Goths pleaded “to be accepted in the Empire as peaceful refugees,” and the emperor decided “out of Christian, neighbourly love” to open the borders and allow the Goths in.

“Roman state officials sought to count the new arrivals, but the operation got out of control,” Demandt writes. “The ferries crossed the river day by day,” so that “very quickly... provisioning problems” emerged in the Empire. “The Goths began to loot, skirmishes took

place.”

After “new multitudes” repeatedly invaded the Empire and could no longer be integrated, “prejudices” spread against “the bearded Germans in their long trousers and furs,” who could not shake off the “odium of barbarism.”

“The government lost control of the provinces, the state monopoly of weapons could not be sustained” and “the executive failed and the overburdened bureaucracy collapsed.”

Demandt asks why it was that “the rich, highly developed Romans had not stood up to the pressure of poor, barbarian neighbours?” He writes, “One reads of decadence, of a society that had become comfortable, striving for the good life for individuals, but having nothing with which to resist the energetic and active hordes of Germans when they flooded over the border, driven by desperation.”

The author’s repugnant historical parable is intended to create an intimidating scenario. A mass of refugees—like the “energetic hordes of Germans” back then—are streaming towards Germany, posing a deadly threat to the state, which can no longer be defended by a society that has become “comfortable” in an “Empire of peace.”

The article was originally set to appear in the magazine *Die Politische Meinung*, which is produced by the Christian Democratic Union-aligned Konrad Adenauer Foundation. But Chief Editor Bernd Löhmann, who commissioned the article in the context of the refugee crisis, ultimately rejected it.

Justifying his decision, Löhmann told Demandt that the text “could be misinterpreted in the context of our political magazine by undesirable sources in light of the events of New Year’s Eve in Cologne.” From his point of view, there existed “the danger that isolated parts of the text could be misused to construct all too facile parallels to the current situation that we would not wish.”

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* did not shrink from publishing Demandt’s article in full.

As if to make clear that the historian intended to stoke up sentiments against refugees by drawing a “simple parallel with the current situation,” it asked him “what we [could] learn from the decline of Rome” and what “he [would] advise the chancellor today as an historian?”

Demandt answered bluntly that it was necessary to pay attention to “the long-term consequences of immigration” and “restrict the influx.” He argued that “the word must first of all get around that it is not worth coming to Germany.” He continued: “We cannot afford to give up our sovereignty. Mrs. Merkel cannot be allowed to act for the benefit of other governments and at the cost of the German people.” Her oath of office “suggests the exact opposite.” One has to “intervene for one’s own people—and not run away from this.”

Demandt's reactionary calls for deterring refugees and his appeals to the "German people" play directly into the hands of extreme right-wing forces. It speaks volumes that Demandt's article was immediately seized upon and promulgated by the chauvinist Alternative for Germany (AfD) and far-right blogs such as "Islamnixgut" (Islam is not good).

His analogy to the Migration Period is highly dubious from a scholarly standpoint. Historian Michael Borgolte from Berlin's Humboldt University explained in the *Berliner Zeitung* that the concept of the Migration Period was first defined by the humanists in 1557, but must be viewed critically today.

"Peoples never migrated," Borgolte wrote. "Even during the 'Migration Period,' there were people from many different ethnic groups who migrated, who were consolidated into peoples only on the territory of the Roman Empire under more stable kingdoms." The Roman Empire did not collapse because of the migrants.

Migration researcher Jochen Oltmer from Osnabrück University also criticised the resort to the concept of the Migration Period in relation to the current situation in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. "A term is simply being used, in part very consciously, that more or less conjures up ideas of uncontrollable mass movements."

Oltmer continued, "The images we have in our head from the Migration Period are those of destruction and violence. They are pictures that point to darkness."

It is not the first time that Demandt has conjured up sinister images of the Migration Period to pursue an extremely reactionary agenda. His political motives were made clear in an interview he gave to the conservative newspaper *Die Welt* last September 11.

In it, he declared that the "concept of the 'Migration Period'" was currently "in more than one sense justified." Extent, movement and motivation were essentially the same in both the migration of peoples in the Late Antiquity and the current migration.

He claimed the issue was "the pressure from poor countries with large populations on rich peoples with few children," adding that the old "north-south conflict" was once again breaking out.

He went on to say that the "challenges today from Islamists and other religious fundamentalists" were similar to the challenge faced by the Roman Empire from the Christians, "who absolutely did not want to integrate, until the emperor himself recognised the cross and became Christian."

Demandt talks of "migrants" and "Islamists" in one breath. He does not seek the cause for the flight of these people in the endless imperialist wars in the Middle East, but paints a picture of the impoverished, uneducated, religious fundamentalist "migrant" with many children—a racist stereotype that has been embraced by the political right in Germany for decades.

Demandt refers to Oswald Spengler, one of the leading right-wing intellectuals in the Weimar Republic. Spengler stated as early as 1931 that the north-south conflict would be "the great problem of the future." However, while Spengler assumed that the people would be armed, Demandt cynically writes that "the fact that the refugees are arriving unarmed [makes] it all much more difficult."

Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), whom Demandt described in a 1999 article as the "mastermind of the conservative revolution," represented a cultural philosophy characterised by resolute opposition to liberal democracy and socialism. His book, *The Decline of the Western World* (1918), achieved considerable influence among right-wing conservative circles of the day. Spengler is considered one of the intellectual precursors to National Socialism, even though he did not

directly cooperate with the Nazis.

Demandt's propaganda against refugees also recalls how German historian Heinrich von Treitschke made anti-Semitism respectable in bourgeois circles during the rule of the Kaiser in the Second German Empire. In his notorious essay "Our Standpoints," which provoked the Berlin anti-Semitism dispute in 1879, Treitschke stated that the "internal formation of the Reich" was threatened by "the soft philanthropism of our era," and, above all, by the German Jews. He discoursed on the "national exclusivism" of the Jews and claimed they were unwilling to assimilate into society.

Treitschke demanded that the Jews "approach the values and thoughts of their Christian co-citizens," and "show piety towards the beliefs, values and feelings of the German people" by "becoming German in themselves." He conjured up a flood of Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe, who at the time were given the derogatory designation "eastern Jews," and wrote:

"[Y]ear after year, out of the inexhaustible Polish cradle, there streams over our eastern border a host of hustling trouser-peddling youths, whose children and children's children will someday command Germany's stock exchanges and newspapers. The immigration grows visibly, and the question becomes more and more grave: how can we amalgamate this alien people?"

The text included the notorious sentence that in the 1930s appeared on the title page of the anti-Semitic propaganda paper *Der Stürmer*. "Up to the most highly educated circles, among men who would distance themselves from church intolerance and national pride, the cry is raised today as if out of one mouth: The Jews are our misfortune!"

Under conditions of deepening capitalist crisis and growing social tensions, all of the long-forgotten filth is reemerging among German academics. Historians like Demandt are openly walking in the footsteps of their right-wing conservative predecessors, of whom not a few—above all philosopher Martin Heidegger and jurist Carl Schmitt—became enthusiastic National Socialists in the 1930s. If it was Jews who were considered the "misfortune" at that time, today the stereotypes and lies of anti-Semitism are being directed against Muslims and refugees to justify police-state measures, chauvinism and war.



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