

Three men sentenced for petty crimes at New Year's event in Cologne, Germany

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Two months after the New Year's Eve events in Cologne, allegations of mass sexual assaults by refugees at the event, which dominated the media for weeks and served as the pretext for a clampdown on refugees, are increasingly being exposed as groundless.

On Wednesday, February 24, the Cologne district court convicted the first three "criminals" from New Year's Eve in front of a crowd of 60 domestic and foreign journalists. But those convicted were not violent sex offenders, let alone rapists, but rather stood accused of petty crimes.

The 23-year-old Moroccan Younes A. was in court because he snatched a telephone from a tourist's hand as she photographed the Cologne Cathedral in front of the train station. A bystander tripped him, and the phone was returned when he dropped it on the ground. The police detained him and found a bag of amphetamine.

For these minor offences, Judge Amand Scholl imposed a six-month suspended sentence on the young man and a fine of €100. The judge also asked provocatively if Younes A. had not groped the tourist, even though the witness and the accused denied this.

On the same day, Judge Julia Roß sentenced 22-year-old Tunisian national Ahmed M. and 18-year-old Moroccan Samir S. for a similar offence. Both had stolen a camera during New Year's Eve. Ahmed M. was given a three-month suspended sentence and Samir S. faces the threat of a youth detention sentence if he commits another crime in the coming two years.

In a large city like Cologne, numerous such thefts take place on a daily basis. As chief of the Cologne criminal police Norbert Wagner said at a press conference in mid-February, the criminal statistics for Cologne in 2015 indicate more than 14,500 such incidents. This equates to 40 thefts per day, although at

major events like New Year's Eve or the Cologne carnival the level is much greater.

According to Wagner, just 8.8 percent of these crimes are committed by people from North African countries, i.e., less than one in ten. Some young men from North Africa, who have been left to fend for themselves after travelling alone to Europe and Germany and have virtually no prospect of work or asylum, make ends meet by turning to petty crime.

This milieu has nothing, or at most very little, to do with the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have fled from the Middle East and North Africa in recent months due to war and unbearable poverty. But this has not prevented the media and numerous politicians from seizing upon the events in Cologne on New Year's Eve to wage an unprecedented propaganda campaign against refugees.

The convictions of February 24 will not be the last from the New Year's Eve events in Cologne. But to date there has been little to suggest that future trials will bring anything more substantial to light than the first ones, or that they will confirm the vastly exaggerated reports of mass sexual assaults.

On New Year's Eve itself, around 100 complaints were received by the police, mainly of sex crimes and pickpocketing, a magnitude of incidents that fully corresponds to other such large-scale events. Only in subsequent days, when the first reports of rapes, sexual offences and thefts spread in the press, did the number of complaints rise rapidly.

Most complaints were filed after January 4. By January 11, the figure stood at 550. Cologne's police now report 1,100 complaints related to New Year's Eve. But according to the police, less than half, around 440, relate to a sex crime.

In mid-February, the authorities were investigating 73

accused. At that point, 15 suspects were in custody, but only one on the suspicion of a sex offence. The two complaints relating to rape had not resulted in any suspects being found.

Even representatives of the state prosecutor and police have expressed doubts about how many of the complaints were based on criminal offences. Given the vast press campaign, it cannot be excluded that some were vastly exaggerated or were the result of anti-immigrant sentiments. Social media sites are full of such propaganda tirades.

“In one case, the police have confirmed that the sexual crime alleged in the complaint did not take place as was claimed,” a spokesman for the state prosecutor told the *Huffington Post*. And Rainer Wendt, the chairman of the German police trade union and hardly known as a “friend of foreigners,” was cited as stating, “Several of the alleged sexual crimes by refugees are inventions.”

A central role in the spreading of news about alleged mass sexual offences in Cologne was played by the circulation of an internal report by an anonymous federal police officer on January 4. The report referred to “numerous crying and shocked women and girls”, who alleged “sexual assaults by several male refugees and groups.”

According to the report, some suspects allegedly said to the police, “I am a Syrian, you must treat me well! Mrs. Merkel invited me.” The report claimed refugees tore up their refugee papers in front of the police and said, “You can’t do anything to me, I’ll get a new one tomorrow.”

To date it remains unknown who authored this report and for what political or other motives. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the Cologne state prosecutor is investigating the possibility of an internal violation of service secrecy within the police. It is being reviewed how internal police reports found their way into the media.

However, the press is clearly being supplied with material from the police for their anti-immigrant propaganda. The latest example is an incident in Kiel. On Thursday, February 25, the local police reported on the “mass molestation” of three girls by 30 foreigners in a shopping centre. The media accepted this narrative uncritically and raged about a “mob” of Afghans, refugees and foreigners.

Four days later, the accusations proved to be groundless. Eyewitnesses contradict the claims of the police that mass molestations took place. Photos and videos allegedly made of the girls by young men were not discovered. Physical assaults had never been alleged from the outset.

The campaign around the events in Cologne shows the lengths to which the media and politicians are prepared to go to promote a reactionary political campaign against refugees. The alleged sexual assaults were deliberately inflated and exploited to encourage racist sentiments.

The entire political framework in Germany has shifted sharply to the right. Seventy years after the breakdown of the Third Reich, lead articles in the press once again paint a picture of criminal hordes of foreigners whose sole aim is to rape German women and girls.

Stefan Aust, editor of *Die Welt*, even compared the events in Cologne with the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in the United States, which have been used ever since by successive US administrations to justify their wars and attacks on democratic rights.

The events in Cologne have been used in a similar manner to strengthen the police state apparatus, expand public surveillance and, above all, take action against refugees and foreigners. The high point of this campaign was the passage of the draconian asylum package II, which has not only shredded the right to asylum beyond recognition, but is directed against all foreigners living in Germany.



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