

Xenophobic attack on mayor of German city

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The knife attack on the mayor of the German town of Altena, north of Cologne in the state of North-Rhine Westphalia, is the product of the anti-refugee climate created by the political parties and media in Berlin.

On Monday evening, mayor Andreas Hollstein (Christian Democrats, CDU) had just ordered a Döner kebab from a takeaway in Altena when a 56-year-old resident asked him, “Are you the mayor of Altena?” When he said yes, the man struck him from behind and attempted to stab him in the neck with a knife.

Only the selfless intervention of the store’s owner and his son saved the mayor’s life. They pulled the attacker away and restrained him until the owner’s wife called the police.

The mayor could have easily become the latest victim in a series of politicians who have been attacked by right-wing extremists. Cologne Mayor Henriette Reker was stabbed by a neo-Nazi and only barely survived. In Britain, a right-wing extremist brutally murdered Labour MP Jo Cox in June 2016.

Hollstein was in the crosshairs of xenophobic forces after he declared Altena’s readiness to accept 100 more refugees than the city was obliged to under the distribution regulations. The successful integration, the housing of refugees in empty private apartments rather than emergency centres and the placing of refugees into regional workplaces secured several awards for the city and its mayor.

On Monday evening, the attacker shouted, “You leave me to die of thirst and bring 200 refugees to Altena.” The city had recently cut off the unemployed bricklayer’s water supply.

“For me, this person is not the attacker,” said Hollstein on Tuesday. “Instead, those who poison the well are the perpetrators.” The changed climate in Germany is responsible, he added. For years, he said, he has observed a “decline of cultural values.” The mayor firstly expressly thanked the owners of the

takeaway, the Demir family, saying, “I was very lucky that the two came immediately to my aid.”

The mayor said he would stick to his liberal refugee policy. He also rejected a personal bodyguard. A mayor who does his job properly cannot accept police protection when dealing with people, he said.

These statements make Hollstein a great exception in the CDU. The well-wishes by other politicians and warnings against the threat posed by Pegida, the AfD and neo-Nazis are thoroughly hypocritical. Politicians of all parties, from the Left Party to the AfD, are responsible for the changed political climate criticized by Hollstein, as well as the media, which has been systematically agitating against refugees for years.

This began in 2010 with long-serving Berlin finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (Social Democrats-SPD), and his book *Germany Abolishes Itself*. The xenophobic hack work was hyped by the media, making racism once again an acceptable feature of public discourse.

In the summer of 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees sought to flee the hellish conditions in Syria, Iraq, Libya and other countries caused by proxy wars, a wave of sympathy greeted them as they crossed the German border. Even Chancellor Merkel allowed herself to be caught up in it for a brief moment.

The counter-reaction was all the more bitter. Not only Pegida and the AfD agitated against refugees, but also Left Party politician Sahra Wagenknecht, who declared, “Whoever abuses the right to hospitality has lost the right to hospitality.”

Humboldt University Professor Jörg Baberowski railed in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Basler Zeitung* and other media outlets against refugees and the “talk of a welcoming culture.” In a despicable commentary in the *F.A.Z.* published on September 14, 2015, Baberowski wrote, “Why should an immigrant be maintained for free when those who live here have worked hard for decades for this?”

Baberowski was defended against the accusation of being a right-wing extremist, not only by the Social Democrat president of Humboldt University, but also by numerous professors and media outlets.

The events in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015-16 played a central role in the campaign against the "welcoming culture." Incidents and assaults which unfortunately occur regularly at major events where much alcohol is consumed were systematically exaggerated so as to brand all refugees as rapists, violent criminals and potential terrorists.

During the election campaign, the parties sought to outdo each other to see who could deter refugees most effectively and deport them. This issue dominated the election campaign and the subsequent negotiations on the formation of a Jamaica coalition (CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens). The conflict was not over whether the borders should be closed and refugees sent back to their home countries, but by what means this can be accomplished most effectively and without provoking opposition.

Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU), who told the injured mayor of Altena after the assault how shocked he was at the "contemptible attack," told the *Heilbronner Stimme* a few days before the federal election that it is necessary to bluntly tell the refugees, "If you are economic migrants, you have no chance of being able to stay in Germany or Europe." He also promised that he would personally ensure that family reunification for refugees remains banned.

Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) made a highly personal intervention following a new situation report by the Foreign Office to ensure that the halt to deportations to Afghanistan was lifted and deportation flights recommenced.

In the exploratory talks between the CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens, the enforcement of an upper limit for refugees and the banning of family reunification were the dominant topics, and they were reinforced daily by the media. The Greens ultimately stated that they had crossed their pain barrier and largely accepted the right-wing refugee policies of the CSU and FDP.

As a result, right-wing and racist perpetrators of violence feel strengthened and protected against criminal prosecutions. The Federal Criminal Office estimated that in 2016 there were 1,800 criminal acts by right-wing extremists against public officials, and

450 in the first half of 2017. The federal domestic intelligence agency did not refer to the right-wing extremist motives of the perpetrators by name in its official report, instead giving them the euphemism "asylum-critical."

Among the right-wing extremists who prepared death lists which included the names of politicians is the army officer Franco A., who was arrested earlier this year because he created a false identity as a Syrian refugee and hoarded weapons. He was connected to an armed group in Mecklenburg-Pomerania which prepared attacks on Muslims and collected around 100 politicians' names. But on the same day as the attack on Hollstein took place in Altena, the Federal High Court released Franco A. from custody pending the conclusion of investigations.

Hollstein, who continued to receive death threats after the attack, has ended up in the crosshairs of right-wing agitators because the city of Altena contradicts in practice their inhumane propaganda.

The influx of refugees has not only counteracted the rapidly declining population of the former steel town. Altena also has lower levels of unemployment and fewer empty stores. Of a total population of 17,000 in the small town, approximately 450 refugees have moved in. The majority are people from Syria, Afghanistan and North Africa.

On Tuesday evening, many Altena residents took part in a candlelit march against the knife attack on the mayor. Local residents and refugees joined the demonstration through the city centre.



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