

The assaults in Cologne and the call for a strong state

By Dietmar Henning and Peter Schwarz
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With the beginning of the new year, the media and the political establishment have returned to propaganda mode. It is impossible to watch or listen to the news or open a newspaper without confronting demands for more police and surveillance, harsher laws, and the deportation of “criminal foreigners.” Chancellor Angela Merkel has placed herself at the head of the campaign with her call for “clear signals to those who are not willing to comply with our legal system.”

The occasion for this latest propaganda campaign, which has pushed all other topics into the background, is the New Year's eve incident at Cologne Central Railway Station. Groups of apparently heavily intoxicated men harassed, robbed and sexually assaulted numerous women.

Given the massive media attention these events have received, it is noteworthy that eight days later, few concrete details are known. The Cologne police and North Rhine-Westphalian state Interior Ministry are waiting until Monday to comment on them again. But despite the lack of information, it is clear that a calculated campaign is being organised.

Only one thing is thus far certain. Some 1,000 people gathered on the square between the main railway station and the Cologne Cathedral to celebrate the New Year. When some of those present began to set off fireworks in the crowd, the police cleared the square half an hour before midnight, saying they wanted to “prevent mass panic.” Shortly before one o'clock, they once again allowed access to the station.

At this time, a number of women began to file complaints of theft. According to the police, some of them also reported sexual assaults by groups on passers-by. The police dispatched nearly 150 officers to the square, who accompanied some of the threatened women to the railway station. In the station, another 70 federal police officers were present.

The next morning, the police announced that there had been no unusual occurrences. “Despite the unplanned break in the celebrations, the situation was relaxed,” they declared in a press release. In the social media, the attacks in Cologne on New Year's eve were not raised as an issue, as research by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* subsequently showed. Isolated reports of sexual harassment appeared only in the Cologne local press.

On January 2, the police set up an investigation team to look into the incidents. According to the local press, at this time more than 30 women made themselves known to the police and investigators were assuming that there were more than 40 perpetrators.

At first, there was talk of “men of North African appearance.” The police suspected they were dealing with people known to them for months as pickpockets and confidence men who jostle their victims or misdirect them in order to steal from them. Sometimes, sexual harassment and touching are used as a means of deflecting attention.

The Cologne events made national news only after four days, when Mayor Henriette Reker and Chief of Police Wolfgang Albers held a press conference. Since then, they have dominated the headlines.

The number of complaints to the police increased to 121, three quarters of them for sexual harassment, 50 also for theft. In two cases, about which nothing more is currently known, the police are investigating charges of rape. Meanwhile, the police have identified 16 suspects from video recordings. Most of them are not known to the police by name. There have to date been no arrests.

Putting all this meager information together, it appears that the preying of pickpockets, for which the area around Cologne's main train station is notorious, came together with excessive alcohol consumption and the presence of a large, tightly packed crowd. Some of the women reported having to run a gauntlet while being attacked and groped

from several sides.

That is disgusting, but not new in Germany. At major events where there is high alcohol consumption, such as the Oktoberfest in Bavaria, similar excesses often occur, if perhaps not in such a concentrated form.

After the Cologne events began dominating the headlines, several dozen complaints of sexual assault on New Year's eve were also made to the police in Hamburg and Stuttgart.

The events in Cologne have much to do with the social crisis in major German cities, but absolutely nothing to do with the influx of almost one million refugees over the past year. They overwhelmingly detest violence against women, just like the vast majority of Germans. But this did not prevent politicians and the media from making the Cologne events the starting point for a sweeping smear campaign against refugees combined with a call for more state powers.

Federal Justice Minister Heiko Maas, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), spoke of "a whole new dimension of organized crime." Without providing any evidence that the events in Cologne had been planned, he told the *Berliner Morgenpost*, "When thousands of people come together as an uninhibited horde, and that was apparently planned, it is nothing less than a temporary breach of civilization." The term "breach of civilization" has traditionally been used in Germany in connection with the Holocaust.

Christian Social Union (CSU) General Secretary Andreas Scheuer made the sweeping accusation that it was "young migrants" who were responsible for the attacks in Cologne. It is "unacceptable that women are sexually mistreated and robbed at night on the street and in public places in major German cities by young migrants," he told the *Rheinische Post*.

North Rhine-Westphalia Interior Minister Ralf Jäger (SPD) expressed himself similarly, declaring in the style of the far-right, anti-immigrant Pegida movement, "We do not accept that groups of North African men organize to humiliate defenseless women with brazen sexual attacks."

Echoes of the Nazi stereotype of foreign sub-humans who desecrate German women are unmistakable in both statements.

On Twitter, the former family minister, Kristina Schröder of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), said that the "violence-legitimising masculinity norms in Muslim culture," which had been long "taboo," had to be confronted.

Although Federal Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière said there should be "no general suspicion shown towards refugees," he added in the next breath that if North Africans were the perpetrators, this could not be "just ignored."

The smear campaign against "North Africans," "Muslim culture" and "young migrants" is inevitably accompanied by a call for more police, tougher laws and the expulsion of refugees. Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that there would be a "harsh answer by the rule of law." Representatives of all of the parliamentary parties responded similarly, including the Left Party. Its state premier in Thuringia, Bodo Ramelow, ordered a risk assessment of the east German state and warned there could be "no lawless areas."

As a consequence of the Cologne events, the CDU executive is calling for the implementation of a dragnet, including "random checks," when there is "significant danger to public safety and order." The party will adopt such a resolution on Saturday at its conference in Mainz.

The police union has demanded that politicians show "more guts in enforcing existing deportation regulations," and Justice Minister Maas has given assurances that asylum seekers can be expelled after being sentenced to one year's imprisonment.

The events in Cologne are the pretext and not the reason for the call for more powers for the state. Key media outlets such as *Die Zeit* have long called for a "strong state." This is inextricably linked to the return of Germany to militarism and an aggressive foreign policy. The war operations in Afghanistan, Syria and Mali, together with mounting social inequality, are provoking growing resistance. It is against this that increased state powers are directed.

Despite intensive propaganda, it has not yet proven possible to break down the deep opposition in broad sections of the population to war and the prevalence of popular sympathy for the refugees. Now the issue of violence against women is being exploited in order to achieve this goal.

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