

Germany: On Cologne New Year's Eve Massive Attacks on Women

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During the night of the 31 December / 1 January the city of Cologne was the scene of massive attacks on women. These attacks represent a new quality. Similar but less massive assaults took place in Hamburg and Stuttgart.

According to the police up to thousand men were assaulting women on the square in front of the central railway station between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. The women were surrounded by groups of men, insulted, sexually harassed and robbed. An assaulted woman spoke of “fingers in all holes of the body”. The stockings and the slip of another woman were torn off. A woman told that around thirty men had surrounded her, had called her a “slut” and had touched her on the breasts, her bottom and between her legs. There were reports of panic and screaming — and of one case of rape.

The mood in front of the station is reported to have been aggressive. This might have been in part due to the fact that in the course of the evening people, for fun, were throwing fireworks around, partially with the aim of hitting other people.

The local police was present with 143 officers, the federal police inside the station with 70 officers. They were not able to cope with the situation. According to an internal police report, which has been played into the hands of the media, the police obtained the personal data of 71 men, took 11 men in custody and laid a charge against 32 persons. According to the report the overwhelming part of the persons could prove their identity only by showing a registration card of the Federal office for migrants and refugees. Among the 32 men that have been charged are — according to the report — 10 Algerian, 10 Moroccan, 4 Syrian, 5 Iranian, 1 Iraqi, 1 Serbian and 1 US citizen; 22 are asylum seekers. In the meantime over 600 people have been charged, 40 to 45 per cent of them with sexual harassment, the rest mainly with theft. Both offences were often committed at the same time.

The police had cleared the square at 11.35 p.m., but they were not in control over the situation and could not prevent hundreds of men chasing women. Therefore the police direction has been massively attacked and the Chief Constable of the Cologne police had to go.

Especially three issues should be raised:

1) Had the police already known at 9.30 p.m. of riots of young men on the square? No precautions were taken. The police direction of Cologne and the Ministry of the Interior of the federal state of North Rhine Westphalia are blaming each other for this failure.

2) After the event the police tried to conceal what really had happened at New Year's Eve.

3) The police responded, if at all, above all to acts of theft. Women reported that the police in case of sexual harassment merely “watched”. Even a female officer who had been sexually harassed in the crowd got no help from her fellow officers. This is in accordance with the general behaviour of police and legal authorities towards sexual harassment, which in Germany is still regarded as a

“peccadillo” that is not punished under criminal law. This issue is in the centre of the critique by women’s groups.

The political left responded first of all by protesting the instrumentalization of the events for a further aggravation of the refugee policy, which is the aim of the right-wing AfD and Pegida. This is of course correct but the left find it difficult to acknowledge that since the last years (already before the actual wave of immigration!) North African gangs are operating in German cities. This has been suggested by an internal police report (“Casablanca report”), which has become gradually known to the public. We are not sure what we should think of it. However, it would be unrealistic to think that Germany in this matter could remain an exception. Why should the hopelessness of North African societies not have effects on German city streets?

We will have to learn to condemn such deeds without connecting them to cultural identities as people do for who exclusion is the main purpose. Against those people we should affirm that the varnish of a “civilized behaviour towards women” is quite thin. The times where women were the victims of unrestrained sexual harassment do not date back very long. It was the new women’s movement that had pushed patriarchal behaviour into the background. With the growing right-wing backlash it could gain ground again.

It is therefore encouraging that after the New Year’s Eve many women were ready to lay charges and that many women’s groups and initiatives criticize the belittling of sexual harassment demanding its punishment under the criminal code and above all that they — almost unanimously — condemn all attempts to stir xenophobia in the name of women’s rights and to aggravate the asylum laws. One week after the events a manifestation of women in Cologne joined an anti-Pegida protest. For the next weekend (16 January) Syrian migrants are calling for a manifestation in solidarity with the assaulted women. These are encouraging examples for a solidarity between the most discriminated parts of the population.

Angela Klein, 14 January 2016
