August nights of shame

Wolfgang Kaleck, 31 August 2015

"Kristallnacht in August", "Night of Shame" – these are headlines that appeared not in reference to the recent neo-Nazi riots in Heidenau in Saxony but instead in connection with the retrospective pieces on the racist pogroms in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in northern Germany on 22 August 1992.

I phone up an old activist friend in Berlin who quickly guesses what I want to ask her: "You want to know if anything has changed since then?"

That's exactly what I was wondering. I haven't forgotten the racist mob attacks on refugee accommodation centers in East and West Germany in 1991, 1992 and 1993. Arson attacks in Solingen in the Ruhr area and in Mölln in Schleswig-Holstein left a total of eight people dead. I remember my consternation at how few people turned up with me at a solidarity march on Unter den Linden in the capital city of the newly reunified Germany. I haven't forgotten the routine failures of the police and the justice system after the neo-Nazi murders in Magdeburg and many other places in Sachsen-Anhalt and Brandenburg. I certainly haven't forgotten the stories told by punks, Turkish shop owners and Vietnamese residents on the daily terror in many provincial towns around Berlin. I can clearly recall the racist debates in the local parliaments, the federal parliament and in the mainstream media as well as the resultant effective abolition of the fundamental right to asylum under Article 16 of the German constitution. I remember too the pitiful role played by the SPD – prominent members of which managed to survive Nazi persecution only because they were granted the right to stay as exiles in other countries. That was a low point in the political culture of post-war Germany.

As I see it we're not quite in the same situation today. Granted, my friend is right to be angry at the Saxony police and authorities who have "underestimated the situation" for the hundredth time. A reminder: the current issue relates in part to the situation in Heidenau, close to Pirna where the local skinhead group SSS wreaked terror during the 1990s, and not far from Chemnitz and Zwickau where the NSU – a right-wing extremist terror cell with broad support – planned its murders and bomb attacks. We both started asking ourselves if people are going to once again start publishing "the boat is full" pictures showing overflowing asylum centers, refugee families living in camps, and right wing extremists in an effort to stir up fear and pave the way for efforts to tighten Europe's borders.

It’s true that 202 xenophobic attacks have been registered in the first half of 2015, almost as many as in the twelve months of the previous year. But even my skeptical friend sees some important differences between the current situation and events in the 90’s: a palpable sense of solidarity in many parts of the country today as well as greater awareness of the conditions being left behind by people coming from Syria and Afghanistan. Unlike her I do see it as significant that the SPD head Sigmar Gabriel has made an appearance in Heidenau along with Saxon Prime Minister Stanislaw Tillich; even Angela Merkel visited the refugee home there.

And then – just as I’m watching the shameful videos from Heidenau – another friend calls from Paris. She is shocked by the pictures of refugees in Macedonia and the terrible situation across the whole arc from Pakistan to Mali. When we start talking about Germany she says that the situation is a lot worse in France and Britain. Then I see that we have a lot to do in Germany and in Europe, we need to defend the legal and human standards: starting with material and other kinds of help for those seeking refuge here, new efforts to ensure humane conditions in Africa and the Near and Middle East, and a migration policy that lives up to its name and is not merely limited to repelling foreigners. After all, all of us who benefit from globalization – i.e. the majority of German society – also bear responsibility for the problems it brings with it.