

London Review of Books

Diary

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Aldekerk is a village near Germany's post-industrial Ruhr Valley, but it's all immaculate half-timbered houses and shivering lace curtains. I went there last May and when I arrived – it was a Saturday morning – there seemed not to be anyone outside. Somewhere the mayor's son was getting married, and I'd been warned that no one would be available to talk to me during my visit. As I wandered past the window boxes of geraniums, the sober war memorial, the parish steeples, a fire engine roared down Hochstrasse in celebration, and I glimpsed a tidy group of people disappearing into a brick *Fachwerk* inn. The only other signs of life were two old women on their knees scraping weeds from the grout between flagstones. Aldekerk is the sort of village where not even plants may grow out of place, where until recently you might have whiled away your entire life without breaking out of *Platt*, the Dutch-soaked dialect that renders speech lively and incomprehensible to outsiders. The most recent census gave the proportion of foreigners in the area as 2.8 per cent.

About half a mile from the inn is the former Kaisersaal. Once a standard pub or *Kneipe*, today it's a state-approved squat for the village indigent, more and more of whom are refugees. As towns across Germany have accepted their federal allocation of asylum seekers, administrators have fashioned ad hoc shelters out of disused factories, offices, motels and parish houses, usually on the outskirts of town. In this way, they hope to keep neighbourhood friction to a minimum. Even so, at the moment, someone tries to burn one of these improvised hostels to the ground every two to three days.

Around 4 a.m. on the morning of 26 April, acrid smoke rose from the carpet in the rear building of the Kaisersaal. Of those living there at the time a dozen or so were refugees. Two men and a four-year-old child were taken by ambulance to the hospital suffering from the effects of smoke inhalation. When the police arrived they discovered two intoxicated locals, a man and a woman, who gave contradictory statements and were arrested. (In the reporting of German court cases, the names of the accused are almost always withheld.) Firefighters ushered the other residents into a Red Cross tent, where they were given biscuits. Two of the

victims returned from hospital; one man was kept in for two days. The damage – a thousand euros' worth – was cleaned up. Aldekerk moved on. The woman admitted to setting the carpet on fire and, several weeks later, both she and the 24-year-old man were charged with aggravated arson.

The mayor of Aldekerk had been defensive on the phone, blaming two drunk idiots who might not even have had an extremist background and suggesting that the case wasn't worth reporting on; it was an exception, he said, rather than part of a right-wing trend. I'd heard the line before. Apparently, this was a national crisis of exceptions.

I stood outside the Kaisersaal in the heat. The words of an Arabic pop song drifted through an open window. A young man was sitting on the windowsill, smoking. When I called out, he ducked inside. The front door was locked and nobody answered the bell. I approached Johannes and Luka, two boys standing outside passing a basketball between them. (I've changed their names.) Johannes, a skinny 18-year-old, told me they both lived in the Kaisersaal. He had been fostered and showed me scars on his arms and face from childhood abuse. He said he was a cannabis addict, and had been away at rehab on the night of the fire. But his friend Luka, a 15-year-old Serbian asylum seeker, had been there. Neither knew who had started it. Luka thought it could have been a mentally-ill couple who lived in the house; Johannes guessed it was Nazis. There were lots of neo-Nazis in the area. 'I find it a little funny,' he said. Was it funny when people were injured? 'No, of course not.'

The boys offered me a tour. The mayor had told me not to enter the building on my own, and I could understand why. The hallways were squalid, with standing water on the floor and broken windows patched with plastic bags. Tar stains streaked across the floorboards. Behind a bedsheet tacked across a doorframe I glimpsed a young family, resting. There was no courtyard: the corridor connecting the interior buildings was a dank alleyway, protected from the elements by a length of corrugated plastic. We watched a resident climb through a window onto an unsteady chair to get to the bathroom, which, like the kitchen, was accessible only by going outside.

'Everything's quiet now,' Luka explained. Nothing had happened since the fire. The refugees were studying and looking for jobs. Those who were on their own came and went without warning, for prospects in Cologne or Hamburg, or the crossing to Denmark. I told Luka that his German was excellent considering he'd only been here a year. He said he often translated for the rest of his family, including his brother, whom I'd seen earlier, smoking on the windowsill. They were taught German every day in school, he said.

Germany's arson boutade is part of the ongoing wave of 'crimes against refugee accommodation', an official category that includes graffiti, vandalism and flooding.

Individually, the crimes don't get much attention in the media outside the local papers and are rarely discussed for what they are: mob violence, working slowly across great distances. In 2013 Germany's federal Criminal Police Office recorded 69 attacks on asylum accommodation. In 2014 that number rose to 199, and in 2015, a year in which more than a million migrants entered the EU, to 1029. This year, up until 15 August, at least 688 attacks took place. (The Amadeu Antonio Foundation, a hate watch NGO, believes the figure is closer to 800, of which around 100 were arson attacks.) Arrests are rarely reported because they are rarely made. When *Die Zeit* analysed 222 police investigations of the most serious crimes against asylum housing in 2015, they found that just four had resulted in convictions, with charges filed in another eight. In only a quarter of cases did the police have a suspect in mind. In April an official report was released warning of the danger to refugees posed by far-right terrorist gangs or a 'resolute, irrational-acting, fanatical lone wolf', but two decades of research and arrest records suggest that Germany's xenophobic arsonists are something else altogether: normal people, semi-educated and often employed in blue-collar work, with no special interest in politics, who nourish deep economic resentments and an abiding fear of immigration. To classify arson as the exclusive work of gangs and fanatics is to underestimate its appeal as a weapon of the underclass.

The invention of arson belongs to the village. Centuries before urban riots or the Reichstag fire, the enclosure of rural commons provoked incendiary protests, as the right to subsistence gave way to the rise of agrarian capitalism. Barns, fields and houses in the early modern village were the easy targets of class envy. The state has since supplanted wealthy landowners as the perceived enemy of poor labourers, and refugees are the clearest manifestations of state intrusion, especially in the countryside. While hostels have been targeted in cities as *multikulti* as Berlin and Hamburg, the majority of attacks take place in the country's *Aldekerks*. Here witnesses are harder to find and are rarely impartial. Police and fire departments take longer to respond and their resources are meagre. In a small village roles may even double up, as in the case of Sascha D. from Salzhemmendorf, who pushed wood shavings into the neck of a bottle filled with petrol shortly before throwing it through the window of a Zimbabwean family's living room. A few minutes later, Sascha returned to the scene with his fellow volunteer firefighters.

After reunification, mass immigration from the former Soviet Union and Vietnam stirred up resentments among poor Germans in the east. Politicians derided asylum seekers as 'economic' migrants and blamed them for the increasing rates of crime and unemployment. Disenfranchised Germans responded with what remains the worst sustained outbreak of right-wing violence since the Nazi era. In Rostock, thousands cheered as protesters surrounded a high-rise known as 'Sunflower House', where a number of Vietnamese asylum seekers were living. Police stood by as rioters threw rocks and Molotov cocktails, forcing

refugees to flee to the roof to chants of ‘Germany for Germans’ and ‘Foreigners out!’ The following year, four neo-Nazis set fire to the house of a Turkish family in Solingen, killing two women and three girls and injuring more than a dozen others. That fire remained the country’s deadliest instance of post-reunification violence until, a few years later, ten died in an unsolved arson attack on an asylum hostel in Lübeck.

More than a hundred people were killed and thousands injured in the riots of the early 1990s, which were followed by political compromise and two decades of silence. Then, in December 2014, a planned asylum centre burned down in Bavaria, leaving behind swastika-ed walls. The arsonist or arsonists had acted before anyone moved in, avoiding loss of life but causing €700,000 of damage. A few months later, the burning of an uninhabited shelter in Bautzen, Saxony, attracted a group of onlookers who cheered with what the police described as ‘undisguised joy’. When an unfinished hostel burns down, locals may call it a victimless crime. More than half of 2015’s arson attacks targeted empty buildings where refugees were soon to move in.

In Altena, North Rhine-Westphalia, a 25-year-old fire safety officer broke into the basement of a home where seven Syrian refugees were sleeping. He climbed up to the attic and soaked the trusses in petrol. At the trial, he said he had been losing sleep: ‘I was scared of break-ins, thefts, violence and also sexual assaults.’ But he insisted that he didn’t deserve seven charges of attempted murder, and that he’d chosen to ignite the roof instead of the basement so that the refugees could escape. ‘It was not the goal to harm people,’ he said. As in Salzhemmendorf, the fireman joined his colleagues to put out what he’d started.

Arson is ‘a very effective strategy because of the damage it inflicts,’ Ruud Koopmans, the director of integration research at the Berlin Social Science Centre, told me. ‘It postpones and in some cases prevents the local settling of refugees, and if you go to these localities in the days after the attack, you’ll very often hear people saying: “Well, I don’t agree with what they did, but it’s good we got rid of it.”’ Koopmans spent much of the 1990s investigating the causes of right-wing violence in Europe. The current wave of attacks is concentrated in regions of Germany where there is little employment, and women have moved away. ‘So we have young men with low chances in the labour market, low chances of education, and probably even lower chances of finding a girlfriend – then add alcoholism,’ he said.

Koopmans’s research also showed that levels of xenophobic violence tended to be low where extreme right-wing parties were strong, and vice versa. He reasoned that when a citizen can express his views at the ballot box, he doesn’t need to resort to violence. One of the contributing factors to the violence of the early 1990s may have been the strict federal bans on neo-Nazi groups, which were intended to curb extremism. ‘The right-wing scene in Germany is not well organised,’ Koopmans said. ‘There are some local groups, but most of the

violence occurs spontaneously. People go out to the bar, get drunk, and discuss how terrible the refugees are, and they get the idea of setting fire to a hostel.’ Only recently have media-savvy political groups attempted to capitalise on anti-refugee feeling. Both the Pegida movement and the openly xenophobic Alternative für Deutschland owe their recent popularity not to bands of stormtroopers, but to the unorganised losers of globalisation who are quick to respond to political leaders when they say Europe is under attack. ‘We are worried about our wives,’ one local complained to an administrator in Escheburg, Schleswig-Holstein, about an hour before his neighbour, a tax officer, threw an incendiary into the wooden maisonette where six Iraqis were to be settled next to the town’s pristine golf course. Many people find nothing contradictory in the captured arsonist’s defence that he harbours no racist beliefs and was merely afraid of refugees.

The distribution of refugees around Germany is currently based on population size, with regional GNP a distant second factor. ‘This seemingly fair distribution policy is in practice a recipe for disaster,’ Koopmans said. People in Frankfurt are accustomed to foreigners and a 1 per cent increase in the non-native population there will barely register. In a small village in Saxony, however, a 1 per cent regional increase could more than double the number of foreigners in a town. And unlike other countries in the EU, there’s no hate crime statute in Germany, which means that although judges are free to take ‘political motivation’ into account at trial, these cases fall into a range of categories that don’t always align with what other countries call hate crimes. Victims’ rights groups say that prosecutors and judges sometimes fail to take hate motivation into account even when the issue is raised in court. A Human Rights Watch report argues that the legal definition of political motivation ‘can lead in practice to the under-inclusion of “hate crimes” when the perpetrator lacks any identifiable political motivation or ties to an organised right-wing grouping’. Since 2008, the UN has repeatedly suggested that Germany update its approach to racist violence. The attack in Aldekerk was characteristic in that way: the woman didn’t admit to involvement in a right-wing conspiracy, so the police said there was no evidence of xenophobic or Islamophobic motivation. (The prosecutor’s office declined to comment on the ongoing case.)

Over a few dry, brittle weeks in May, I visited a handful of places in Germany where buildings had burned. I visited a commercial park outside Hamburg where a fire had forced three hundred refugees to evacuate a repurposed office building. In the time it took me to catch a train from Berlin, the police had quietly downgraded the case from suspected arson to misplaced cigarette. Officials would provide no further information. ‘A few mattresses burned but no one was hurt,’ an Iraqi man, with a German book under his arm, said as we stood outside the security gate. ‘I don’t know anything else.’

I visited a scorched piece of earth in Witten, tucked among the oaks and ivy of a hillside

Steiner school. The school had announced its intention to house a few families from Syria and Iraq in overflow classrooms back in January. That month the classrooms burned to the ground. As I examined the charred wood that remained, a member of the school board pulled into the car park. ‘We’re still raising funds to rebuild,’ he said. ‘We’re committed.’ In the meantime the refugees had been relocated.

There were plenty of places I didn’t visit, from damaged shelters in Altglienicke and Marzahn – two distant suburbs of Berlin – to quiet Aue, in the mountains of Saxony. I didn’t visit Zwickau or Hilltrup, Esloe, Wetttemberg or Einsiedel, Lohne, Herford, Ildehausen, Pfaffenhofen or Wismar, the villages where flames ran across gambrel roofs, where kids chucked Fanta bottles stuffed with cloth soaked in kerosene. In nearly every case, the police could prove no right-wing motivation and made no arrests. In Kirchhundem, the same refugee shelter was attacked four times. The culprit remains at large.

[Vol. 38 No. 18 · 22 September 2016](#) » [Ben Mauk](#) » [Diary](#)

pages 42-43 | 2713 words