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Reasons for the Alienation of Turkish Youths (June 3, 1993)

On May 29, 1993, young skinheads in the city of Solingen (North Rhine-Westphalia) set fire to the home of a Turkish family, killing five of its members, among them three children. The following article by the German-Turkish author Dilek Zaptcioglu-Rogge was published on the day of the official memorial service for the victims. In it, she expresses the shock, sadness, and anger that young Turks felt about the wave of right-wing attacks on foreigners. The violence, she argues, undercut their willingness to integrate into German society, because they continued to feel discriminated against as second-class citizens.

“Now I Know That I Don’t Have Any Real Friends Here”

Turkish self-confidence is now mixed with bitterness, anger, and aggression

The murderous attacks in Mölln and Solingen have profoundly shocked the Turks. The past years have also seen their share of Turkish deaths: Ramazan Avci in Hamburg, Mete Ekşi in Berlin, and Mehmet Demiral in Mülheim were all attacked and killed by right-wing extremists. But they were attacked individually; often there was a fight or a scuffle, at least each could look into the eyes of his murderer and try to defend himself. With these cowardly nighttime arson attacks, the whole thing has assumed a new quality.

It was actually possible to see Mölln coming. For the past two and a half years, homes for asylum seekers have been set on fire in Germany (in both East and West). The mistake of the Turks was that they failed to see themselves as targets of the growing hatred and thought that it was primarily directed at asylum seekers. After demonstrations you could hear people say “thank God we’ve been spared such attacks” or “it’s a good thing the Germans have such a terrible history they can learn from.”

The attacks in Mölln and Solingen have come at a time that also marks a turning point for Turks in Germany in various respects. For one thing, Turkey is playing a new role in its region, and the political and economic improvements back home have given the Turkish population a new sense of self-confidence. The Turks were never a colonial power and have never in their history suffered any subjugation. As a nation they feel strong and proud. The second great change in recent years is that the majority of Turks in Germany have decided to stay here permanently. In particular, the second and third generations, who grew up here, view Germany as their home and don’t want to leave.

Sadness and anger are the correct words to describe the current mood among Turks in Germany. They are grieving not only for their dead compatriots, but also for themselves, for the years they spent in Germany, and for their future. They severed ties to their homeland in the belief that they could feel at home here in the long run. Now they are gazing into a deep abyss that is opening up before them; one that bears the quintessentially German names of Hoyerswerda, Hünxe, Rostock, Mölln, and Solingen. The murderers have driven a wedge between the Turks and the Germans.

“I applied for German citizenship, but now I’m withdrawing my application,” said a young woman. Another woman has been suffering from depression ever since she received her German passport. A man said: “I thought I got along well with the Germans. Now I know that I don’t have any real friends here.” Above all, the younger Turks are deeply hurt. “Our parents worked here, they paid taxes and were good consumers. They contributed to Germany’s economic miracle. Today, we’re helping to finance efforts to build up East Germany. And this is our reward?!”

The strong self-confidence of the Turks is mixed with bitterness, anger, and aggression. The majority of Turks don’t approve of the street battles that many [of them] have been fighting in some German cities over the past few days. They’re all against violence. But for the sake of honesty, it must be said that they’re also slightly pleased by the Autobahn blockades and sit-down strikes. Finally, a signal that says: “You can’t do whatever you want with us. Enough is enough!” There’s great agreement on that point. And also on the fact that German politicians have hesitated far too long. Bold statements are being made; that, for example, the state was deliberately slow in meting out harsh punishment to right-wing extremists. That people were secretly hoping the attacks would have a deterrent effect on potential asylum seekers. That they thought: “Maybe we’ll disgust some foreigners enough that they’ll leave the country and free up jobs for East Germans.” At the moment, these speculations are very much a topic of conversation among Turks in Germany. Here, something also needs to be said about the attitude of Chancellor [Helmut] Kohl: that the honorable federal president [Richard von Weizsäcker] is participating in today’s funeral services is most welcome; but Turks would have welcomed it much more if the highest active politician, rather than the highest representative of this state, would have chosen to participate and address the Turks directly.*

No one should be surprised when today’s foreign youths allow their anger free reign. What has the state given these young people, who could not choose their place of birth, to justify its demand for composure and level-headedness from them? Didn’t the state label them a “problem” from the very beginning and leave them largely in the charge of social workers and educators? Why aren’t young people of Turkish descent who were born in Germany automatically naturalized? Why do they have to stand in line in front of the alien registration authority early in the morning along with asylum seekers to get the stamp they need? What scars does this harassment leave on the souls of young people? Why are they still referred to as “foreigners” even though they have no homeland other than Germany?

* Whereas President Richard von Weizsäcker immediately condemned the attack, Chancellor Helmut Kohl seemed reluctant to offend his conservative electoral base – eds.

The rage that is rooted in the hopelessness of these young Turks is certainly exploited by left- and right-wing Turkish fanatics. These groups, a remnant of the 1970s, have negligible membership figures and exercise virtually no influence on the Turkish community in Germany. This is confirmed by reports by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. But in such volatile times, young people are more prone to being influenced by extremists. Slogans such as “we won’t let ourselves be burned alive” can be heard these days, not only at demonstrations in Solingen, but also in Berlin coffeehouses. In order to retain credibility, anyone who gets upset about shattered window panes today should have been out on the streets last weekend to express his or her rage at people having been burned alive.

The majority of Turks in Germany want to stay here and live in peace. They are sick and tired of always being mentioned in the same breath as the word “problem.” Finally, there has to be an end to talk of the so-called “foreigner problem.” “Foreigners” have names such as Ahmet and Ayşe; they have faces and individual biographies, and they expect German society to finally accept them and grant them the civil rights they have been denied for far too long. Acknowledgment of dual citizenship and quick and unbureaucratic naturalization could send a signal. By now, Turks know very well that in a democracy disenfranchised people are second-class citizens. They want to break out of a situation in which they lack rights and a voice.

As an adolescent fittingly put it, “the neo-Nazis don’t check people’s passports before they murder them.” German society must finally settle its accounts with the murderers and perpetrators of violence within its ranks. The minister of the interior is expected to employ the police apparatus and the Constitutional Protection Office as effectively as possible in order to prevent further acts of arson. The young perpetrators, who were only apprehended after the attack, need to know that they can no longer be assured that the majority of Germans support their actions. Penalties that serve as a deterrent aren’t the only requirement; the ostracism of neo-Nazis from the community is necessary as well.

Pride prevents many Turks in Germany from admitting their pure fear. This fear is real. Every Turk who lives in a small, sleepy German town in a building inhabited solely by Turks can no longer feel safe. It is recommended that they avoid subways and commuter trains after dark, immediately report any suspicious persons sneaking around their homes to the police, and file a complaint after every attack. A German friend who lived in Turkey for a long time once said, “You Turks and we Germans have one thing in common: We both definitely want to feel loved by everyone.” But in order to get to that point, first we have to stay alive.

Source: Dilek Zaptcioglu-Rogge, “Now I Know That I Don’t Have Any Real Friends Here” [“Jetzt weiß ich, dass ich hier keine wahren Freunde habe”], *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 3, 1993.

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