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On Patrol with the new German Vigilantes

> This is the 15. article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

by Oliver Saal

Germany's political culture currently faces a shift to the right as anti-immigrant violence and attacks on refugee camps are on the brink of becoming a [daily routine](#). The populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) did achieve successes in every [recent federal state election](#). Through their success politics gained a new political quality. Anti-immigrant groups such as PEGIDA in Dresden regularly mobilize hundreds and sometimes thousands of people. The increased number of refugees that came to Germany in 2015 is instrumentalized to fuel racism and to spread nationalist sentiments.

For these groups it is self-evident that immigrants are a threat to the security of their homes and children, but also to women and the integrity of the state as a whole. Certainly, the events of New Year's Eve in Cologne and other German cities can be seen as a point of culmination for these discussions. [During the celebrations](#), more than hundred cases of sexual assault, numerous thefts and at least five rapes were reported. All of these incidents involved women being surrounded and assaulted by groups of men, reportedly of "Arab or North African appearance."

While only few vigilante groups had been active before the events of Cologne a comprehensive formation of vigilantes [could be observed in the aftermath](#). The groups organize themselves via private Facebook groups and Whatsapp. Just on Facebook alone more than 100 groups could be counted in January 2016, with names such as *Fulda takes care*, *All for one and one for all Düsseldorf*, *Citizens Initiative for Security Braunschweig* or plainly *Vigilantes Memmingen*. As we will see, most of them never passed the stage of gathering in Facebook groups and ranting about the government. Yet, it is still instructive to observe fears and sentiments expressed in these groups. Others indeed have become active – by carrying out arson attacks and bombings against homes and cars of political opponents as well as refugee camps.

The "TFL/360" in Freital: From vigilantism to far right terrorism

The small town Freital in Saxony made the national news because of its vigilante group. From March 2015 on, continuous rallies were held by up to 1,500 local and external racists. They picketed in front of the former hotel *Leonardo* that sheltered no more than 100 immigrants. Not only were stones thrown and arson attacks committed, but immigrants, their supporters, politicians and journalists were attacked in the streets of Freital. This hostile and aggressive atmosphere was seconded by massive hate speech and rightist agitation online – foremost by the group *Vigilantes FTL/360*. The group was founded after one alleged case of sexual assault at a public transport bus no. 360. From that moment on, members of the Facebook group followed and documented almost every footstep made by immigrants in Freital. They patrolled on bus line 360. And they carried out attacks.

The actions of the group prove that the road from vigilantism to terrorism can be a rather short one. Seven men and one woman are facing charges of founding a terrorist association. The case covers them carrying out bombings and arson attacks against an alternative community project in Dresden and an immigrant accommodation in Freital. Bus driver Timo S., the alleged leader of the group, is also charged for chasing a local politician, beating him up with a baseball bat and for threatening witnesses of the incident. During raids, police found several explosives, fireworks and swastika-banners. The Facebook site of the group is still online, amassing 2,500 likes and still agitating against their political enemies of *Freital against Nazis*. The group is a case in point for a group of Neo-Nazis in disguise of vigilantism.

For protagonists of the far right, the self-portrayal as vigilantes is very attractive: It helps them to appear as "men of action" and they know pretty well that alleged mass crimes perpetrated by immigrants are a reliable factor for mobilization. Back in 2014, vigilante members of the Dortmund-based "right town-guard" ("Rechter Stadtschutz") patrolled in uniforms. They handed out pepper-spray to pedestrians – together with leaflets touting "we don't leave you alone" and "where state's power fails, we citizens are in demand!"

Vigilante groups are not a new phenomenon in Germany. In Bavaria and Saxony, the police cooperate with so-called "security watch groups". They rely on the right to perform "citizen's arrests", based on §127 of the German code of criminal procedure, if the arrestee is caught in flagrante delicto. It grants everyone observing a crime the right to apprehend the offender. Since the fall of the iron curtain, primarily in rural areas close to the Czech and Polish borders, members of such groups patrol voluntarily – advised and accepted by the police.

Mixed scenes

But boundaries are not always clear-cut between groups like the Freital *FTL 360* and a regular neighborhood watch. First, even members of the latter groups probably have a rather disputable understanding of law and order and are likely to have an affinity to the use of guns. Second, it sometimes remains unclear who is responsible for the organization of a group and what his or her true motivations are. Third, vigilante groups often emanate from rather mixed scenes – as was the case for *Vigilantes Munich*. Members of *a.i.d.a.* – the Munich-based centre for the documentation of and information about modern Nazism – monitored the foundational meeting of the group. As a.i.d.a. stated, members of security corporations, doormen, soldiers, bikers, and neo-Nazis such as Peter Meidl from the German neo-Nazi-party *Die Rechte* were among the men who met in a Munich restaurant. Previously, they mingled in a private Facebook group named *Vigilantes Munich*, sharing racist and anti-Islamic posts. This is also where they arranged their meeting.

The role Facebook is playing in finding like-minded people and spreading rumors about factual or alleged crimes committed by immigrants can hardly be overstated. Inside their private groups, users feel free to express even their most drastic violent phantasies. When one user of the group *Vigilantes Berlin ST* posted a newspaper report about forty Dresden hooligans chasing immigrants in the streets and looting shops, he added the comment: "It begins! Best regards from intervention group Dresden!" Another user commented: "That's the right thing to do here. Beat the bastards to death."

Through such speech-acts, users try to break a feeling of powerlessness and regain the capability to act. In each of those vigilante Facebook groups, immigrants are regarded as a looming threat. What is striking is the frequently expressed fear of being outnumbered by immigrants who are being held accountable for rising crime rates, thefts and sexual assaults. They are not called immigrants, but insulted with terms such as "rapefugees" or with ironical denominations as "skilled laborers" – always in quotation marks – or are simply seen as "invaders." In every group, neo-Nazi symbols or contents are being posted and are never met with any objections. The activism of most of these users is limited to the internet and Facebook which proves the assumption that vigilantism rather constitutes a political project than being an actual attempt to re-establish law and order, as Matthias Quent, sociologist at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, describes the phenomenon.

"The appearance of vigilantes has a temporal, spatial and discursive connection to the so called refugee crisis", he explains. Vigilantes see themselves as saviors of Germany, as those who fight to re-establish order where the state retreats. "The events of Cologne were widely seen as an example for this withdrawal of the state", says Quent.

But: the withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities is not a rumor; it's a fact – not only in matters of domestic security, but also in other political fields such as welfare, health care, and education. By highlighting this development, vigilantes try to legitimize themselves. They try to prove that the state does fail to fulfill its objectives: to maintain stability and order, to guarantee the rule of law and to protect property. Based on this assumption a necessity for self-defense is being constructed, a situation wherein vigilante violence poses as a legitimate political instrument.

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Oliver Saal (Mail) studied History at Freie Universität Berlin. He lives in Berlin as an author, amongst others he writes for ‚Netz gegen Nazis'. Most of his writings deal with European far right politics in historical and contemporary perspective.

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Tags: AfD, facebook, Freital, Germany, hate speech, Pegida, terrorism, Vigilantes FTL/360, Vigilantes Munich, vigilantism

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