

off our backs

a women's newsjournal

black women find racism rampant in germany

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The following letter is addressed to German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. oob received a copy for publication.

We are two North American university professors and authors of international reputation, here in Berlin visiting, lecturing, and conducting interviews with Afro-German citizens for a forthcoming text. After witnessing the horrifying demonstrations of racial hatred and community compliance in the assault upon refugees in Rostock, and recalling similar occurrences in Hoyerswerda during our visit last year, we are deeply troubled by dangerously fascist elements we see at work.

That many citizens of Rostock appear to support the bombing of women and children in their homes; that the Rostock police leave murderous hooligans with firebombs surrounding a house where people are still living; that the BBC International News reports this bombing and burning of homes of political refugees is not merely an act of local madness, but one carefully organized and participated in by persons from other areas of the country; all seem strongly reminiscent of the atmosphere and conditions preceding the National Socialist rise to power in the 1930s. These occurrences suggest a repeat of that intersection between community compliance and silent assent which, once before, permitted the monstrosity of a Hitler to spread like a virus across Europe.

Over and over in the past eight years, as we have taught and lectured in Germany, we have been told that, depending upon age, the speakers either totally deplore and wish to disassociate themselves from the malevolent inaction of their elders during National Socialist times, or, if they are older, that they were themselves ignorant of what was happening in their own backyards.

Now is the time for these voices to be heard in some meaningful protest against a repeat of this piece of German history. But where are the personal and official outcries against this racist victimization and xenophobia? We watch Rostock and our hearts grow heavy with fear for our own safety, and for the safety of our Afro-German sisters and brothers, as well as for the safety of Jews, and foreigners, and all others who white German reactionaries may decide are unacceptable because of who they are, and therefore suitable objects of social fury and destruction. Is this the new German version of "ethnic cleansing"? The problems of mass unemployment and social despair throughout East Germany that followed in the wake of reunification will not be resolved by frying two little brown girls, asleep on camp-cots in a refugee hostel.

Why has the dismantling of the Berlin Wall meant that we now feel less and less safe as Black Women visitors to ride the U-Bahn in Berlin, lest we be insulted or attacked? Why must we

become more and more afraid to walk the once safe streets around Alexanderplatz in East Berlin after dusk?

If there is any official concern about Germany's image upon the current world stage, how can Federal and local governments sit by and allow this escalating savagery against foreigners to continue, without saying, loudly and tellingly, THIS HAS GOT TO STOP! ? Call out the Border Police, or the army, if necessary. Responding to this racial and ethnic violence is not about what position is taken on Federal laws concerning refugees. It is about taking an official position that the beating and burning and killing of other human beings because of the color of our skins, or the way we worship, or who we are, is wrong, and must be stopped wherever, and under whatever nationalist excuse it occurs. Rostock and Hoyerswerda, and the beatings and murders of Afro-German, African, Turkish, and Asian people that have taken place throughout Germany in the last three years, do not merely raise the question of how many foreigners can be admitted or excluded from Germany. These acts raise the fundamental questions of racism, anti-semitism, and xenophobia, issues within the German psyche that have not been publicly examined or addressed in the last 50 years, and which still permeate the

current expressed consciousness of the larger German society through which we move.

Six years ago white Germans turned around to stare after us and comment as we walked through East Berlin. Three years ago West German children shot at us with water pistols as we parked near the Kurfurstendamm. This year we do not venture into an East Berlin cafe after dark.

Why has the dismantling of the Berlin Wall meant that we now feel less and less safe as Black Women visitors?

Where are the good Germans who will not acquiesce this time in silence? I am encouraged and heartened by the slowly growing number of white German citizens beginning to organize and protest against the racial and ethnic hatred being acted out in their name. But this number must swell, and quickly.

The beating and killing and burning of other human beings because of who they are is wrong. It was wrong in 1932 and was not stopped, and it led to the murder of millions of people, to the laying waste of a continent, and to the defilement of an entire generation.

Why are these obvious historical connections not being made in the German media, in the German government, on the streets of countless German cities?

It is wrong now, and if each one of us does not lend whoever we are, whatever our relative power may be, to stopping this social cancer, how can Germany maintain any pretention of rectitude either as a nation of moral persons or as a nation of moral standing before the courts of the world? Is this not the perfect moment in the world's story for concrete actions that can counterbalance pieces of a history about which so many Germans still whisper of in shame? Otherwise, what do these recent racist occurrences say for Germany's leadership in the future European community?

What do they say about Germany to the two of us as African-Americans; what do they say about Germany to us as members of the 7/8ths of the world's population who are people of Color?

Next month, next year, as we teach and lecture in New Zealand, in England, in Japan, in South Africa, and the question is asked, how was your last trip to Germany, what is Berlin like, now? What will be able to say?

Gloria I. Joseph
and
Audre Lorde

international community supports lesbian

Dear off our backs,

I notice in your October issue that you have included an interview with Cherry Smyth and refer to her book *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions* wherein she says that it was only through the actions of LABIA that publicity and support were generated for Jenny Saunders, the Young Lesbian who was imprisoned for six years for "indecent assault" last year. In fact, *Lesbian London* covered the story on several occasions and the story first broke in *The Pink Paper* (which is where we picked it up from). In her interview she repeats her assertion: "That case could have mobilized a lot of sympathetic straight feminists, a lot of older lesbian feminists and yet it didn't. It was a couple of gay men from OutRage and the women from OutRage who really mobilized around that. Without LABIA, one of the lesbian branches of OutRage, there wouldn't have been any activity at all. Because of the coverage and the action by the queers she got letters everyday in prison . . ." (Smyth makes several other inaccurate references to Jenny's case.)

This is not a "trashing" letter. Through your publication I would simply like to put the record straight. I am blowed if I'm going to let another

Lesbian make me, or Lesbian Information Service, invisible. We have *enough of that from other media.

Many Lesbian organizations and publications know, as well as LABIA themselves (having had several telephone conversations with them), that it was Lesbian Information Service who initiated a national -- and international -- support campaign; I, personally, visited Jenny in prison about a dozen times (it taking a day to visit); we made enquiries about Lesbian solicitors and advised Jenny to change her solicitor; we analysed information regarding the case and sent this to Jenny's solicitor and barrister; we also worked with the Probation Service in order to support Jenny, to say nothing of the crap I used to get from the prison authorities! If anyone is interested in more information we are including a report of the campaign in our latest Annual Report available from PO Box 8, Todmorden, Lancashire, OL14 5TZ, England.

Smyth was correct when she said that there was little support (in this country). Most support for Jenny came from other parts of Europe (from our press release to the International Lesbian Information Service in Amsterdam); articles have appeared in several Lesbian publications in Europe

and most of the money sent to support the Campaign and Jenny came from Europe! There was also a group of Lesbians in Swindon who consistently supported Jenny. But then Swindon and Lancashire are not in London!!

Perhaps in the future Ms. Smyth would like to get her facts right and maybe even a public apology would be in order?

Yours sincerely,

Jan Bridget
Lesbian Information Service
Lancashire, England

