# Attacks on asylum-seeker shelters by far-right rioters are systemic to how border regimes communicate

 *Dr Philipp Seuferling, LSE Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications, argues that recent attacks on asylum-seeker shelters in the UK are endemic to how border regimes are built and communicated.*

On 4 August 2024, two hotels used to shelter asylum-seekers became targets of the far-right, racist, and Islamophobic riots that have been coordinated across the United Kingdom since late July. In Rotherham, around 700 people attacked and stormed a Holiday Inn Express, smashing windows, throwing chairs, bottles and pieces of wood, and lighting up a fire escape. In Tamworth, the windows of a Holiday Inn were smashed and petrol bombs were used to start fires. The attackers reportedly chanted “We want our country back” and “Get them out”.

The specific targeting of housing for asylum-seekers as part of the current racist xenophobic violence is not by chance. It is part and parcel of the structural design of Western border regimes and how they communicate to the public about the place of refugees within our societies.

Refugee camps are an intrinsic part of how Western asylum regimes function. Ranging from prison-like structures on Greek islands, hotels in England, military barracks, to a ship in Dorset, or Conservative dreams of flying asylum seekers to centres in Rwanda, such places (beyond the media image of tents and makeshift housing) comprise institutions holding people on the move in confined, temporary, exceptional spaces. They are also paradoxical spaces: limiting movement and putting residents under surveillance,

while promising care, shelter and access to an asylum procedure (although these are often empty promises). For the state, such refugee shelters seek to reconcile a self-glorifying imaginary of providing humanitarian care with a project of racist exclusion, hostile deterrence, and humiliation. It is isolation under the guise of humanitarianism.

On the one hand, refugee camps are spaces of exception from certain social and legal realms, excluding and surveilling their residents. But, at the same time, in order to better explain the cyclical violence against camps and their residents, refugee camps must be understood beyond the ways they exclude people – and instead, *within the roles they play* in the bordered, ethno-nationalist society and what they are designed to mean and symbolise.

**Refugee camps are actors in the "border spectacle"**

The Holiday Inns in Rotherham and Tamworth are part of what scholars describe as a communicative architecture: buildings that serve both a sheltering function and a symbolic function. They are part of what border scholar Nicholas De Genova calls the "border spectacle": the camp is an identifiable and delineated place, imagined as floating above "normal" sedentary society, which is charged with symbolic meaning to communicate this otherness of the people inside to the rest of the country's citizens. By being an excluded space that is very much inside the nation's borders, it becomes an actor in a theatrical spectacle, tasked with indicating who belongs and who does not.

The physical locations of refugee camps – whose addresses are currently circulating in far-right social media groups in England – become synonymous with the racialised figure of the "refugee" as a threat to the nation. They communicate that *this place* is where *they* are and *we* are not. Ultimately, the refugee camp comes to function as a mirror for the bordered state: vital to keep alive a mirage of ethno-nationalist fantasies and of unconditional citizenship, by constantly displaying who is outside of these realms: for whom belonging is conditional.

**Refugee camps as targets of hate**

This co-dependency of the refugee camp and the ethno-nationalist state helps to foster the structures of feeling of hate currently on display across the UK: an emotional orientation towards a physical site and its dwellers, a site which communicates and

constructs the idea of ethno-national coherence, and at the same time disturbs it, only to be repaired by way of violence and destruction. There is a continuous line between calls to let asylum seekers drown in the English Channel and attacks on hotels reported to house refugees. Both forms of violence are justified in the dehumanising willingness to see “others” die.

Hence, refugee camps are anything but mere segregated, disconnected sites. They are key elements of the border spectacle and of a communicative architecture of the border that uses ‘Othering’ in order to construct a mirage of the national self. In this sense, the English rioters (and the far-right networks mobilising them) are embedded in a structure of feeling that has been naturalised by the design of the border regime: putting refugee camps into the spotlight, in order to legitimise and communicate boundaries of conditional and unconditional belonging to the nation along racialised lines.

No surprise then, that in 2020 Reform UK leader Nigel Farage filmed himself driving by alleged refugee shelters across the country, pinpointing them as targets. And no surprise either that the plan to deport refugees from the UK to centres in Rwanda could be seen as a viable option of refugee governance. Indeed, there was speculation that Rishi Sunak wanted a single flight to Rwanda to take off before he called an election – underscoring how crucial spectacle is to policy. Refugee accommodation and transportation become a spectacle-like show for the public, the way to rescue and repair the ethno-national self-identity.

If the refugee camp becomes the place to mirror and repair an ethno-nationalist self, the result is, in the words of Lilie Chouliaraki’s most recent book, a sense of victimhood being constructed and weaponised by the rioters. A sense of victimhood, however, that is completely disconnected from the conditions of pain and suffering created by the border regime in the first place. The fact that hardly any news article so far has featured the voice of a resident of the attacked asylum-seeker shelters (and if so, quoted via activists), while the voices of the rioters and police are ample, testifies to the border spectacle’s communicative hierarchies.

**Border regimes and far-right violence fuel each other**

Refugee camps as a tool of border and humanitarian regimes have a longer history (as I show in my PhD and forthcoming book), and so does the violence against them. As a

scholar of German migration history, I see the current violent outbreaks as particularly reminiscent of the pogroms against migrant housing in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in August of 1992, when hundreds of neo-Nazi rioters besieged an asylum-seeker shelter and a housing unit of Vietnamese contract workers hired by the GDR. Thousands of bystanders applauded the violence, and the police retracted at the height of the pogrom when a building was set on fire through Molotov cocktails, with residents and a TV-reporter team trapped inside. These events, embedded in wider-scale, racist, and neo-Nazi violence across newly reunified Germany in the early 1990s (referred to as the "baseball bat years"), ultimately led to the largest reform of Germany's asylum legislation in post-war times, severely limiting the right to asylum in unprecedented ways.

While states worldwide double down on camp-based accommodation for people on the move and violent progroms against refugee camps remain cyclical, the current events in the UK are urgent calls to radically rethink practices of care, shelter, and solidarity, and border regimes more widely. Germany's historic tightening of its asylum laws in 1994 as a result of the progroms did not end violence against shelters. Attacks remain at a record-high. Border regimes and far-right violence fuel each other, a dynamic created by both the physical and communicative architectures of the border – in dire need of radical reimagination.

*This post represents the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Featured image: Sonnenblumenhaus in Rostock, Germany – mc005 (mc005), CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons