

Three youth jump to their death

The group suicide in Reichenbach, Germany

Hendrick Paul
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On August 26, three youth from the town of Reichenbach in the Vogtland region of the east German state of Saxony took their own lives.

Michael M. (14 years), Mike K. (17 years) and René B. (18 years) jumped from the Göltzschtal, a railway bridge connecting Reichenbach to the town of Plauen. They plunged 78 metres and died instantly on impact. Prior to jumping the youngest and oldest of the trio had tied their wrists together with a rope. The official medical examination of the bodies revealed that the youth did not act under the influence of drugs or alcohol and there was no evidence of the involvement of any third party.

In two farewell letters the youth expressed their weariness with life. One letter stated: "We are no longer satisfied with life. We anticipated something better". The second letter expressed the sense of hopelessness of the three much more bluntly: "I am no longer interested in this shitty life. I just want to get out of here."

With horror and a sense of disbelief, relatives and friends of those who died, the population of the town of Reichenbach, and of course politicians, contemplated an act that expressed a general mood of helplessness. The three had not drawn any sort of social attention to themselves. Michael was in the ninth year of schooling, had received good marks and was keen on sport. Mike was undergoing a year's training before taking up work, while René was undertaking an apprenticeship in building.

Despite this, none of the three saw any meaning to their lives. The demands made by the youth on life and for their future were apparently much more complex and not fulfilled by the fact that they had a training which could perhaps lead to a job.

The immediate circumstances leading up to the suicide are barely known. There was very little to be gleaned from media reports. In fact the case had very little to offer to the press in terms of sensationalism. With their drive to explain any sort of tragic event such as mass accidents, people running amok and group suicides in easily digested terms, the press avidly searched for elements in the biographies of

the three youth which could justify the action they took.

It appears, however, that they sought in vain. It became apparent that there were no extraordinary circumstance or events that could help explain the suicides.

Eventually the press eagerly took up a hint given by investigating authorities that there were indications that the youth could have some involvement with Satanism. Occult signs—an inverted crucifix or the number "666"—were to be found in the farewell letters. From then onwards the motives of the three youth were garbed in a sort of hellish fog. "Leap to death remains a mystery", proclaimed the *Siiddeutsche Zeitung*. With its headline: "Leap into hell", the *Tagesspiegel* indicated the possibility of an occult connection. *Der Spiegel* magazine went so far as to headline its article on the deaths: "Satan, are you among us?"

For its part the *Frankfurter Rundschau* bluntly posed the question: "Why did Michael, Mike and René leap to their death? Was it because they were fed up with life, or was there a Satanic background?" The newspaper poses the two as alternatives! But is it not the case that a turn to Satanism presupposes a substantial element of weariness with life as it is?

Media speculation over a satanic milieu in Reichenbach, reports over "death chat-lines" in the Internet and a few interviews with church representatives and officials concerned with following the activities of sects, were aimed at shifting the motive for the suicides from this world onto the spiritual plane. In terms of such reporting it made no difference that the content of the farewell letters in no way indicated an occult-Satanic background to the deaths. The media had decided on the line it sought to take and thereafter arguments for or against the participation of the devil in the tragic fate of the three youth became the norm.

The real issue is: what conclusions can be drawn about a society when youth, or even children, with ostensibly good prospects, regard their lives and future as senseless? And does not the way in which they chose to die—leaping from a bridge which is one of the biggest of its kind in the world and a local tourist attraction—represent a cry, a

condemnation, a form of protest against the conditions prevailing in this society?

More than 11,000 people commit suicide in Germany every year. This figure includes more than 1,000 children or youth under the age of 18 who decide to end their lives before they have really begun. Most of the limited number of cases that have come to public attention are characterised by farewell letters similar to those left by the Reichenbach trio.

Two weeks ago a German television programme *Panorama* reported on a 13-year-old youth from the north German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, who killed himself three months ago by strangulation and setting fire to himself. In his farewell letter he wrote: "To my friends, relatives and people who know me. This will be the last thing that I write, because I am going to hang myself. My life is shit. I get bad marks, I have hardly any friends. The main reason, however, is because I am continually beaten up by big right-wing a**holes in my school."

Between July and November last year a series of suicides by young people afflicted the small village of Klietz by Stendal in the east German state of Saxony Anhalt. These victims also left notes expressing a complete lack of perspective, such as, "It cannot go on this way anymore." *Der Spiegel* felt the need to describe the local conditions in some detail: "It is a fact that the region between Havelberg and Tangermünde offers little in the way of prospects for youth. Berlin and Magdeburg are a long way off. The tidy small town of Havelberg, with its typical wooden houses, lacks a cinema and disco, there is not even a railway station... Teachers complain about a general depressive mood in their schools... Children forced to hang around inside during rain and fog complain about boredom and the senselessness of it all or utter the sentence: 'Here everyone has thought about killing themselves!'"

Today the same magazine describes the youth leaping from the bridge at Reichenbach as the expression of a thirst for adventure in an otherwise boring town. In its concluding passage the *Spiegel* article cynically belittles the fate of the deceased: "When it wasn't drugs or alcohol, then perhaps it was the Internet. Television. Capitalism. The devil. Boredom. Country-life. Something must be responsible."

Der Spiegel certainly had the possibility of making a more profound investigation into the background of these most recent suicides. Reporters from the magazine accompanied German chancellor Gerhard Schröder in his recent 10-day summer trip through east German states and had ample opportunity to examine the conditions and opportunities (or lack of them) for the broad masses of people living in the region.

Just three days after the terrible occurrence in Reichenbach the magazine reported on August 23 from the town of

Wernesgrün, just a few kilometres away and renowned for its brewery. The magazine quoted the local mayor saying that unemployment in Wernesgrün was less than in Saxony as a whole, but conceding that the area lacked any perspective for youth. "We cannot get to the young people anymore. The youth are just getting up and going."

Typical was the experience of one local 15-year-old girl who made 18 applications before she was finally accepted for an apprenticeship. She added: "That means I am one of the few lucky ones." In every other respect, "the place is as dead as a doorpost."

Last year 43,000 more people moved from the east of the country to the west than did so in the opposite direction. This is four times higher than the equivalent figure for 1997. In addition 200,000 live in the east, but undertake often marathon journeys to work in west Germany. They are forced to do so by average rates of unemployment of twenty percent in the east, under conditions where there is no indication of any improvement.

It is no accident that the media today expresses so little interest—even choosing to forget what they said a short time ago—over the social conditions which form the background to the tragic fate of three young people. It is also no accident that they prefer to emphasise irrational motives on the flimsiest of evidence.

Increasing numbers of people are coming to realise that today's society has little to offer to young people and, under certain conditions, even drives significant numbers to take their lives. A former teacher who now sells postcards at the base of the bridge at Göltzschtal posed himself the question: "How can young people, who do not even know what life is about, voluntarily take their own lives? Something is wrong with the state." A Leipzig worker involved in advising those attracted towards religious sects commented as a matter of fact that the urge to suicide by young people had to be explained in terms of the deficits they found in their lives. "Politicians in Saxony should stop their constant cutting of funds for youth work."

For the media, however, who defend the free market economy as the best of all possible worlds, there is only one explanation when three young people seek to escape the laws of the market at the cost of their own lives—they must be crazy.



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