

Long prison sentences in Norwegian neo-Nazi murder trial

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On January 17, the murderers of the 15-year-old dark-skinned Norwegian, Benjamin Hermansen—son of a Norwegian mother and a father from Ghana—were sentenced to 16, 15 and 3 years imprisonment.

Berit Sagfossen, the public prosecutor, had requested the state's maximum penalty of 21 years for each of the main offenders because the murder was racially motivated, making it a major crime in Norway. The prosecution accused the defendants—the main offender Joe Erling Jahr, 20, his accomplice and ideological leader of the group Ole Nicolai Kvisler, 22, and Kvisler's girlfriend Veronica Andreassen, 18, who was not directly involved in the assault—of the unprovoked, “brutal and cowardly” racist murder of Benjamin in the Holmlia district of Oslo. A friend of Benjamin was able to escape the attack.

All three belonged to a neo-Nazi group known as the “Boot Boys”. In the three months prior to Benjamin's murder, several members of the group had already been arrested for violent assaults or arson attacks against dark-skinned persons and then subsequently released.

All of the accused pleaded innocent to the charge. Admitting responsibility for the fatal stabbing, Joe Erling Jahr alleged it was an accident and that Benjamin had fallen onto his knife during a scuffle on a fence. He claimed that they had really only wanted to give him a scare. Kvisler totally denied having been in possession of a knife and taking part in the incident. But the court considered this version implausible because the post-mortem examination showed that Benjamin's body bore a number of stab wounds of various sizes, obviously stemming from more than one knife. If Jahr's version was correct, Benjamin would have had to have fallen a number of times on his chest and back onto different knives from different directions. Moreover, a number of witnesses testified to seeing two men kicking and stabbing a person on the ground.

The accused made no secret of the racist motivation in persecuting Benjamin. During the trial they stated that in their opinion “Norway should be kept for white Norwegians” and “We hate foreigners.” The flat where they worked themselves up with “White Power” music before the attack was adorned with swastikas and other Nazi symbols.

Veronica Andreassen stated to the police that Jahr had boasted he was proud when the three of them later saw on television that their victim had died. Now Jahr could wear red shoelaces in his boots—regarded in neo-Nazi circles as a trophy for killing someone.

Benjamin's mother, Marit Hermansen, expressed disappointment over the sentences. She claimed that failing to impose the maximum penalty sent a false signal. “The judges admitted that it was a racist murder but they didn't really take that into account in the sentencing,” said Mrs Hermansen. “Racism is there but we aren't doing anything about it.” In her opinion, there “is nothing worse than being killed merely on account of one's skin colour.... It's a question of what kind of society we want.”

The brutal murder of Benjamin Hermansen provoked a great outburst of anger a year ago. The genuine disgust of a large segment of the Norwegian population concerning this patently racist murder expressed itself on February 1 in the greatest protest demonstration since the Second World War. Over 40,000 of Norway's 4.4 million inhabitants gathered in Oslo alone.

The shock that such a thing could even happen ran deep. “People saw that Norway wasn't like what they'd thought,” said Nadeem Butt, director of the Centre against Racism. “Most believed racism wasn't a problem here. That's now changed,” he said.

The newspaper *Dagsavisen* commented, “This must open the eyes of the authorities and all those who don't want to acknowledge the existence of Nazism and racism

in Norway.” Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, several government ministers, as well as Crown Prince Haakon and even NATO General Secretary George Robertson—by chance on a visit to the country—also took part in the demonstration.

Ministers frantically demanded legal measures against right-wing radicalism, extending to the banning of Nazi groups. Official reaction was one of complete incomprehension as to how such a thing could even happen.

But did the incident really occur out of the blue? Even if the number of Norway’s potentially violent racists—according to press reports—amounts to no more than 150 to 200 people, Benjamin’s murder in no way constitutes the isolated and totally unexpected incident that officialdom claims it to be. The prevailing political climate in relation to immigrants has led to numerous acts of racist violence over the last 12 months.

In 1999, 17-year-old Arve Beheim Karlsen, of Indian descent, died after throwing himself into the harbour when chased by a gang of right-wing extremists crying, “Kill the nigger.”

In the period from 1987 to 2000, the Centre against Racism registered 1,300 racist incidents—including shootings, vandalism, arson, intimidation and other acts of violence.

This political climate is above all being fostered by the xenophobic and populist Progress Party, shown by surveys to sometimes have the support of 22 percent of the population. The party received 14 percent of the parliamentary vote last September.

But the state and government are playing a role here, too. Norway’s supreme court reached a verdict in 1999 allowing landlords and estate agents to place advertisements for residences with the proviso “For Norwegians only” or “Only for persons with a knowledge of Norwegian culture and the Norwegian way of life.”

The state authority for the media has granted a new concession to the nationalistic local radio station, “Nite Rocket”, which broadcasts Hitler’s speeches, racist music and incitements to violence.

But it is particularly the Social Democratic Party, which has enjoyed uninterrupted rule since the 1920s, that bears the main responsibility for the right-wing populist Progress Party achieving so much power that it can now even wield direct influence on government policy. The Social Democrats have tolerated the Christian-conservative minority government that has been in office since the last parliamentary election.

Norway is one of the richest countries in the world, with one of the highest rates of income per head of population, a booming economy, and a national budget recording massive surpluses due to the enormous revenues from its oil and gas reserves. However, Jens Stoltenberg’s social democratic government maintains a rigid austerity policy in order to protect the interests of the nation’s industry within the globalized world market. This austerity programme has led to deterioration in the schools, the hospitals and provision for the elderly. The heavy defeat suffered by the Social Democrats in last September’s election—when their support was reduced by more than 10 percent, achieving their worst result since 1927—was principally due to the unwillingness of a large part of the population to put up with long waiting queues for hospital beds at a time when the national budget was bursting with surplus finance.

According to a recent survey, 126,000 people in Norway have to survive on an income below the poverty line. In spite of enormous state revenues, the government has allowed two distinct worlds to develop in Oslo: prosperous West Oslo with its elegant shopping districts, fine restaurants and numerous people wearing expensive furs; and East Oslo, including the Holmlia district, where many poorer people and immigrants live and compete for scarce flats and housing.

Reflecting widespread concern with this social deterioration, the political editor of the daily newspaper *Aftenposten*, Harald Stanghelle, commented recently: “We’re no longer satisfied with our social system. No one trusts social democracy any more. We were used to good schools, hospitals and old age care, but now we see that the standard of these important services is no longer adequate.”



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