

German school shooting exposes widespread social tensions

19-year-old kills 17 in Erfurt

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As the full extent of the tragic shooting in an Erfurt school in eastern Germany became clear last Friday, many people across the country were stunned as they followed the news. Robert Steinhäuser, a 19-year-old student who had been expelled a few months previously from the Gutenberg-Gymnasium in Erfurt, the main city of the east German state of Thuringia, shot dead 12 teachers, a secretary, two students and a policeman before shooting himself.

The scene was repeatedly shown on special television broadcasts. School students reported to journalists how the perpetrator, garbed in a black mask and armed with a pistol and pump action shotgun, moved from classroom to classroom, deliberately shooting down his former teachers. Apparently, the former student sought to kill even more victims, as an additional 500 bullets were later found in the school.

Following the events in Erfurt, cultural and sport meetings were cancelled in many German cities over the weekend and the governing SPD (German Social-Democratic Party) also postponed a national meeting it had arranged to discuss its programme for forthcoming national elections in the autumn. A “day of mourning and reflection” has been called for in all German schools for Monday, April 29.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) was one of the first politicians to make a statement on the incident. It was, he said, “a terrible, incomprehensible crime,” adding that it was an “isolated event, which exceeds the imaginable and defies any hasty attempt at explanation.”

This is, in fact, the opposite of the truth. While many details are still emerging, it is already clear that last Friday’s bloodbath can by no means be regarded as an “isolated event”. There has been a steady growth in Germany of such explosions of violence, expressing the deep frustration and lack of perspective by young people, mostly school students or apprentices.

Two months ago, on February 19, a 22-year-old killed the director of a technical college and seriously injured a teacher. Two years ago, a 17-year-old student shot the head of a secondary boarding school in Bayern, then shot himself in the head, remaining in a coma ever since. In the autumn of 1999, a masked 15-year-old forced his way into a classroom and stabbed a 44-year-old female teacher a number of times in front of a classroom of students. Just three weeks later, three youth were arrested in Bayern when it became clear they had worked out a plan to kill the headmaster and a teacher at their school.

Robert Steinhäuser, the perpetrator of last Friday’s attack, has been described as a student of average abilities, but who was struggling academically. Fearful of pending examinations, he falsified sick notes

on a number of occasions. According to press reports, he didn’t tell his father, mother or any other relative that he had been expelled from school.

He did not come from a particularly underprivileged background. His mother worked as a nurse and his father for the Siemens concern. His parents were separated, reportedly amicably, and the young Steinhäuser lived in an apartment in the attic of a house belonging to his grandfather.

Although schoolmates and authorities were apparently taken by surprise by the young man’s rampage, he had clearly manifested a fascination with weapons. Details about his activities also strongly suggest that he was influenced by extreme-right politics. He was a member of two shooting clubs—the Domblick Shooting Club as well as the official police shooting club. His mother told the newspaper *Bill am Sonntag*, “My son was a weapons freak.”

Through his membership in these clubs he learned how to shoot and acquired his licenses for the pistol and long-barrelled “pump gun” used in the assault. It remains unclear where he obtained these weapons and the 1,200 rounds of ammunition found by police. Such an access to weapons is rare in Germany, where strict laws govern their possession.

In his leisure time, Steinhäuser frequently watched violent videos and listened to music glorifying violence. *Der Spiegel* magazine wrote that he had a tendency to listen to “macabre music and play blood thirsty computer killer-games.” One of his favourite games was the violent “Counterstrike.” According to *Bild am Sonntag*, he described himself as “Satan’s son” in Internet chat rooms. His favourite band was reportedly the American group Slip-knot, whose latest CD is entitled “People=S**t”. According to *Der Spiegel*, the band’s musicians “carry armbands like the Nazis”.

Despite Steinhäuser’s disturbing history, the media and politicians have declared his actions beyond explanation. German President Johannes Rau (SPD) declared: “We have no answer and mourn over an incomprehensible act.” As in previous cases, such violent incidents are explained as the isolated acts of the mentally ill or psychopaths, based on the “American cult of violence.”

In the Berlin *Tagesspiegel*, leading columnist Gerd Appenzeller wrote: “We are so clever, so reasonable. We can explain almost everything ... but how small we are, and how desperate and helpless when we are confronted with a catastrophe such as the ... shooting yesterday in a school in Erfurt.”

But such complacent talk serves to exclude any broader questioning of the significance of this brutal act and its relationship to prevailing

conditions of life in Germany. The political elite have attempted to use the shock over the tragedy, and sorrow for its victims, in order to divert attention from their own responsibility for the deteriorating conditions confronting the German population.

There can be no doubt that the cold-blooded murder of 16 innocent people constitutes a despicable crime. But how is one to account for the fact that a young man who had not reached his twentieth birthday resorts to mass murder because he was twice denied permission to take his school-leaving exams? What degree of desperation, lack of hope and perspective is necessary to drive a young man to such extremes? How sick is the society which produces such levels of anger, frustration and destructive energy?

If one puts aside the current widespread moralising over the “depths of human cruelty” involved in last Friday’s attack, and instead looks at the inter-relationship between social development and the actions of an individual, then a clearer picture emerges.

Robert Steinhäuser began school just 12 years ago, as the former state of East Germany (GDR) collapsed and was integrated into Germany as a whole. The formative years of his childhood were characterised by the introduction of the laws of the market economy into the eastern half of the country. The hypocritical morality of the Stalinist GDR government was tossed aside, replaced by an outlook which put forward no perspective for the future. Numerous former Stalinist bureaucrats replaced their rhetoric about socialism and solidarity with a capitulation to competition and the free-market system. Success and social ascendancy favoured those lacking any scruples.

The subsequent social decline in all the states of the former East Germany, including Thuringia, took devastating forms and was bound up with the spread of thoroughly reactionary social viewpoints. Personal achievement was prioritised at the expense of social responsibility, with egoism and a “dog eat dog” attitude predominating. With the accompanying development of social inequality, increasing numbers were destined to live in poverty, condemned to unemployment or low-wage jobs.

This development is apparent throughout Germany, but above all in the east of the country. In Thuringia, the official unemployment rate stood at 16.5 percent last year. Many thousands of others have abandoned the search for work as hopeless and have been reduced to collecting social assistance. The unemployment statistics also do not include the additional thousands of workers who travel hundreds of miles weekly or even daily in order to work in west German states such as Bayern and Hessen.

In addition, many thousands leave the eastern states every year. The number of those employed in the state of Thuringia has shrunk to less than half in the last 10 years. Unemployment has also been deliberately used to deflate wages. In 2000 the average gross wage of a worker in Thuringia was just 62.7 percent of that of a worker carrying out equivalent work in the west of the country. Youth are particularly hard hit. Since 1995, the number of unemployed amongst youth under age 25 has increased by 25.5 percent. In many regions, more than half of young people are without work and lack any chance of gaining a decent job.

The state’s regional government, under conservative Prime Minister Bernhard, has carried out cuts at every level—particularly in education, youth, sport and leisure facilities. At the same time, social policies generously favour big business and a small layer of social climbers.

Illusionary hopes of more democracy and improved living conditions, widespread in the years immediately following German

reunification, have been dispelled and replaced by anger and bitterness. In the neighbouring state of Saxony-Anhalt this same development led last Sunday to record levels of abstention and the biggest loss ever of votes for the ruling SPD in state elections.

In schools, this state of affairs means that the end of schooling is not regarded as the beginning of possible new studies or a profession, but rather as the beginning of the end. Many fear the end of schooling as the start of an insecure future, with long years of unemployment. For some years now, teachers have been registering the growth of aggression and violence in their schools.

The transformation of Robert Steinhäuser into a brutal criminal cannot be explained merely in terms of his own personal deficiencies. A large responsibility rests with the political forces which have prevented widespread social opposition to the existing social crisis from developing in a progressive direction.

This applies to the SPD and the Green Party, which were supported in the east of the country in national elections four years ago after promising peace and social harmony. It also applies to the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—formerly the SED, the governing Stalinist party of East Germany), which has used its influence in the east to support the German government. In the case of Robert Steinhäuser, this vacuum of perspective apparently opened the way for the development of a politically reactionary and anti-social outlook.

Not only has the SPD-Green government pressed ahead with a policy of enriching those already rich, and distributing wealth from the poor to the well-off, it has also done away with large portions of the German social system over the past four years, praising the merits of individual responsibility while undermining future prospects for the working population.

The terrible massacre in Erfurt exposes the real nature of a society which is itself based on violence: social violence which forces millions to live in poverty and desperation; state violence designed to restrict democratic rights; and military force, whereby the government collaborates with other governments that have organised their own massacres in the Middle East or Afghanistan, and which also prepares its own military aggression in future.

The time is ripe to counter the pastoral prattle over the “incomprehensibility” of the massacre in Erfurt and expose the more profound social roots which are capable of transforming desperate young people into mass murderers.



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