

# German high school student kills himself in class

## What is the source of violence in German schools?

**Lena Sokal**  
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The recent suicide of an 18-year-old high school student in Germany has provoked feelings of horror throughout the country. Following the recent school shootings in Erfurt it has once again raised the question of what drives pupils to use brutal violence against themselves and others.

Dima K. was a tenth grade student at the Luisenschule in the city of Essen, in Germany's Ruhr area. On June 11, his class was studying German, and, as in classrooms throughout Germany at the end of the school year, the students were discussing their marks and which classes they would be enrolled in the next semester. When the teacher announced Dima's exam results and warned him that he might not be promoted into the next grade, the youth pulled out a 21-centimeter carving knife and, in front of the whole class, plunged it 12 times into his stomach. An ambulance was called, but despite an emergency operation the young man succumbed to his injuries.

According to the police, the student had bought the knife the day before with the intention of taking his life; the receipt was still in his school bag. The authorities spoke vaguely about the motives for the suicide, attributing it to "school and personal problems".

The school's headmaster, Hans Schippmann, and fellow students could not explain the bloody suicide. Dima, who as a child had immigrated from Moldavia, had not been a loner and was "well integrated" into German life, Schippmann said. He was unremarkable, did not use drugs and was an enthusiastic basketball player. Although he had already repeated one grade, and his move into the eleventh grade stood in the balance, his future at the Luisenschule was not at risk.

According to his headmaster, Dima was weak in some subjects but, like many pupils, strong in others. The headmaster speculated that the youth confronted a host of personal problems and that his poor marks in German may have been the last straw.

Schippmann admitted, however, that there were shortcomings in the school itself. "We should take much more interest in each individual," he said. "We should do more to help young people through life's difficulties and problems." He defended

the German teacher, who, in a "normal situation", had criticised Dima's performance, and referred to structural reasons for the lack of attention to pupils—teachers' time is increasingly taken up with administrative chores.

Dima's suicide may stand out because of the extreme violence with which he ended his young life, but it is not an isolated case. There are indeed good reasons to look not only for personal or psychological causes for the suicide, but also at the social conditions which contribute to the high number of student suicides in Germany.

After traffic accidents, suicide is the number one cause of death for German youth. An average of 40 young people attempt suicide in Germany every day, and three of them die in the process. A recent study by the University of Bremen, which surveyed youth between the ages of 12 and 17 at 36 schools, found that one in 10 pupils had contemplated suicide at least once.

Other studies have shown that students commit suicide at a substantially higher rate than apprentices or workers of the same age, suggesting that the German school system bears some responsibility.

Schools serve—and not only in Germany—not merely to pass on knowledge and education, but also as instruments for judging performance and controlling selection, exercising a strong pressure on children, forcing them to adapt early on. The three-track education system in Germany separates fourth grade pupils into those who will transfer to a *Hauptschule*, *Realschule* and *Gymnasium* \*. This means 10-year-olds are divided according to their educational performance and attitude, thereby determining at a very early age their further educational paths and, to a large extent, the course of their entire adult lives.

The social pressure to perform, transmitted through school and the home, affects children in a destructive manner, suppressing their talents and inducing anxiety. Many pupils feel powerless in face of school, and react to it with school phobia, depression and aggression. School phobia is very common and many children suffering from it are "treated" with drugs.

In addition to teachers lacking time for pupils due to a heavy administrative workload—referred to by the headmaster of the

Luisenschule—poor teacher training also contributes to pupils' problems going undetected until it is too late. At German universities, teacher training concentrates on specialised knowledge, while pedagogical methods play only a subordinate role and psychological training is almost non-existent. Like the public schools, German universities are also subject to austerity policies, and training is subordinated to economic considerations.

The educational system in Germany bears a great responsibility for many problems that affect children and teenagers. At the same time the schools themselves suffer from wider social problems, especially when these take a destructive form such as drug abuse or acts of violence.

A look at the social conditions in the city of Essen, where Dima lived, provides an insight into the additional pressures bearing down upon young people. Essen is located in the heart of the Ruhr area, a region that developed during the industrialisation of the nineteenth century. For many decades, the area depended upon coal mining and steel production. The high number of politically organised and class conscious workers in the region provided a stronghold for the parties and organisations of the socialist workers movement—first the Social Democrats (SPD) and the trade unions, then after World War I the Communist Party (KPD) and other smaller parties and groups.

Those times are gone. Coal mining and steel production are no longer profitable, and despite all attempts at "structural transition" unemployment is extremely high—up to 18 percent in some Ruhr cities. Essen has the highest number of people living on welfare in the Ruhr area; in the run-down quarters of north Essen, poverty is rampant. At the same time, Essen is also home to extremely rich families and serves as headquarters for 10 of the 100 wealthiest companies in Germany. There is undeniably a great deal of wealth in the city, but it is distributed very unequally.

Not only have the economic conditions changed, but the political landscape as well. Ever since the Ruhr became an important industrial area it has been a stronghold of the SPD. While the SPD had long since abandoned its revolutionary Marxist origins, the party remained bound to a program of social reform. As long as the industry of the Ruhr was prospering, SPD mayors and senators in the area distributed part of the large public income from business taxes to build up an extensive system of social services. This policy, established to prevent unrest and preserve the status quo, won the party support from large sections of the population and absolute majorities in elections.

With the end of post-war economic growth and the increasing globalisation of production, the program of social reform based on a national economy has reached a dead end. SPD-led governments in Berlin, the federal states and the cities have all adopted austerity policies, systematically working to dismantle social services while facilitating tax windfalls for big

companies and the banks. At the same time, they have encouraged the deterioration of working conditions in order to attract transnational corporations and investments and convince companies to keep at least parts of their businesses in Germany.

This cost-cutting policy has led not only to growing poverty due to unemployment, poor salaries and welfare cuts, but also to a general lack of perspective among young people, along with widespread alienation from the political establishment. In the 1999 local elections, for the first time since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany, the SPD lost its absolute majority in some of the most important cities of the Ruhr. While candidates of the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) registered victories in Essen, Dortmund and other cities, this had less to do with growing support for the CDU than with a massive abstention from the polls. In north Essen only 25 percent of eligible voters cast ballots.

New local CDU governments have intensified cost-cutting and austerity policies introduced by the SPD. One recent decision of Essen's CDU-led city council regarding educational policy was to close down three of the city's five *Gymnasiums*, among them the Luisenschule.

The severe social situation combined with a lack of political orientation and perspective have created an atmosphere of despair and hopelessness. In a society where the notion of solidarity seems to be a thing of the distant past, young people and even children are urged to use their elbows to press ahead. Personal advancement is perceived as the only alternative to degradation and poverty. There is even greater social pressure on immigrant workers and youth to perform better than the native population in order to gain a decent position in the labour market.

The precise reasons why 18-year-old Dima decided to take his life may never be known. But in the end, violence of students against themselves or others must be understood as a reflection of the growing social violence characterising German society and encouraged and fed by the former organisations of the working class.

#### Note:

*Hauptschule*—a school at lower secondary level providing a basic general education; *Realschule*—a school at lower secondary level, providing a more extensive general education and the opportunity to go on to courses at upper secondary level that lead to vocational training or university education; *Gymnasium*—school covering both lower and upper secondary level and providing an in-depth general education aimed at preparing students for university.



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