Germany: Two years since the Erfurt school shooting

Documentary details the tragic actions of Robert Steinhäuser

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Tragic school shooting—the actions of Robert Steinhäuser, a documentary film by Thomas Schadt and Knut Beulich

"I think I am still at the beginning of my life. At the moment I am trying to pass my final school examinations as best I can. A while ago my aim was to study information technology, but you need ten points in this subject to get in, which I cannot achieve. Therefore I have to unfortunately give up on this dream. School is currently anything but fun because it is only ever about coming up with some sort of results. My aim at the moment is to first get good marks in the exams, and second work as a systems analyst.

"I see myself as a person who has certain defects and who is sometimes difficult to bear. On the other hand I've also got a good side, like my humour, for example. I don't know how others see me and somehow it doesn't really matter. Opinions range from 'likeable' to 'cannot stand him.' In my opinion what's important is how you see yourself and not how others see you"—Robert Steinhäuser, German assignment in year 11, Gutenberg Gymnasium.1

This citation, read by German pop singer Herbert Grönemeyer, starts and ends the documentary by Thomas Schadt and Knut Beulich about the mass shooting which took place in the German city of Erfurt two years ago. On April, 26, 2002, 19-year-old Robert Steinhäuser—heavily armed and wearing a head mask—went to his former school and shot 16 people to death, before taking his own life.

The filmmakers deliberately avoid using secondary film effects, like music. "No effects, no aesthetic frills, no pseudo-sentimentalities," they wrote in February this year. "The discussions alone seemed to us to speak for themselves, in their expressiveness and emotion, and as unobtrusively put together as possible, without the need for any kind of commentary from us."

In their film, Schadt and Beulich have succeeded in providing numerous details about the social causes of Steinhäuser's shooting frenzy.

The film allows teachers, students and relatives of the victims to speak, as well as, for the first time, the parents and brother of Robert Steinhäuser, who remain visually and acoustically anonymous. As their statements are read out by actors, the film shows pertinent photos and long camera shots and pans, which remain unobtrusive in order to allow the viewer to keep listening.

The film makes clear that the assertions made by politicians, the media and some academics, that Steinhäuser's rampage was a one-off event and inexplicable, are false and designed to avoid uncomfortable social and political questions. According to the film, the murders held a mirror up to society—a society in which young people are so desperate and so lacking in hope and perspective, that many of them break down.

Robert Steinhäuser was neither an outsider nor abnormal. On the contrary, what is striking is just how normal his life was up until his horrible crime. He was a student with problems, like those of so many young people of his age; he had the same teachers as his fellow students; and he had parents who were typical, particularly for East Germany.

In fact the comments of Steinhäuser's parents demonstrate that the reunification of Germany, with its consequences for the former East Germany, played a significant role in the circumstances that led Steinhäuser to murder. [This environment is, by the way, illuminated very well in *Für Heute Reicht's* (That's Enough for Today)—the much-discussed and readable book by Ines Geipel.]

The film depicts the helplessness of the parents: their desperate search for signs that they did not pick up on, their self-reproach for not taking better care of their son. For the family the shootings were just as surprising as for all those who knew Robert.

Robert Steinhäuser entered school the same year the GDR (German Democratic Republic, the former East Germany) collapsed. His primary school years were marked by the social decline of East Germany. Mass unemployment and impoverishment took hold and the dishonest morality of the Stalinist bureaucracy was replaced by the morality and laws of the free market. Personal performance, not solidarity with others, was heralded as the guarantee for a good livelihood. However, only a few managed to obtain a better living standard under the new conditions, especially in the 1990s. Most were driven into unemployment and cheap labour, and thereby into poverty and misery. A rat race developed in all areas of society—including in the schools—over who would get the few opportunities on offer.

After primary school Robert attended high school.1 At the first teacher-parent night, however, Robert's parents learned of the rampant violent behaviour in classes at the school that made teaching impossible. As a result, his parents decided to send him, along with his elder brother, to the Gutenberg Gymnasium (a higher level high school). "Robert can't stay here," his mother

recalls thinking, “our poor child among all these scatterbrains.” Today, Robert’s parents reproach themselves about this decision: “That was the biggest mistake of our lives.”

During the reunification, Robert’s parents felt insecure and helpless. “It meant that even the most normal jobs could only be obtained when one had the Abitur,”2 his mother explains. “Under the GDR everything was completely different.” In 2001, Robert experienced problems in the 11th grade. His father once told him: “Complete the Abitur, whatever grade you get. It’s the only chance you have to get a job and earn money and lead a decent life.”

The Abitur, or “any other sort of leaving certificate,” was the task assigned to Robert by his parents. They knew, however, that if Robert did not pass the Abitur he would leave school without any kind of certificate (a school regulation which has since been abolished)—a situation that led to internal family disputes. In particular, his mother reported how she berated him due to her concern about his uncertain future. He had to do something and learn: “I was fuming at him,” she said. At the end of the film she explained: “If reunification had not come about—although I think it is good that it did so—then Robert would have been happy to have been an electrician or something similar.”

The parents in this way transferred their insecurities to their son. But should they be criticised for that? Which parents, in uncertain times, would not wish their children to get a good leaving certificate? Parents and son all found themselves under pressure, and Robert broke.

Moreover—and this is made clear in the film—pressure increased in the Erfurt Gutenberg Gymnasium. The inscription above the entrance door, shown several times in the film, declares: “Live in order to learn.” However the Gutenberg Gymnasium had a very peculiar, although unfortunately widespread, notion of learning. Pupils at the Gutenberg Gymnasium who participated in the “Scream for Change” initiative (also the film’s original title) deplored the fact that the school—and not just theirs—is hard, intolerant and unjust. They immediately began questioning what was false and bad, instead of what was good and just. They were constantly told that school is there to make sure you earn money later. They were consistently deprived of the fun of learning, the pleasure one gets from just understanding something. What counts is so-called performance: learning by heart and reproducing what is required.

In spite of the terrible events, school director Christiane Alt is not prepared to change her attitudes. She quickly denies any responsibility for what happened. Robert “developed problems in school, which originated in his primary years.” Unfortunately the film directors do not take up the issue of the unlawful barring of Robert from the school by Ms. Alt. Instead, in the film Alt propounds her theory that children and adolescents must acquire the ability to deal with setbacks. Students suffer many defeats. They have to learn how they can “emerge stronger through defeat.”

Unfortunately, Robert didn’t learn this. Ms. Alt does not bother to explain who should have taught him these abilities. Certainly it was not herself. “Robert was incapable of learning to live with defeat,” she declares. Alt should have said that Robert had not learned to adjust to the pressure of success. He didn’t live in order to learn in school. He wanted to get his Abitur in the Gutenberg Gymnasium so that he could learn a profession that he enjoyed. He wanted to learn in order to live.

This was confirmed by one of his teachers, Christine Welkow. When Robert was in grade 11 she heard from colleagues that he “was not going in the direction we favour for our students.” After a short pause, she spoke again, but in a quieter tone as if she were speaking of a blemish: “Later he became much more independent in his outlook.” Are these the teachers who derogatively refer to their students as “plebs”?—as Utta Wolff confirms. She is a teacher at the Gutenberg Gymnasium whose husband was one of Robert Steinhäuser’s victims.

The documentary by Thomas Schadt and Knut Beulich is an indictment of German society and its school system. What is even more alarming is that apart from the minor change to the Thuringian state law previously mentioned (forcing students in Gymnasiums to take a test in the 10th grade to obtain a leaving certificate), the root causes for the tragic event in Erfurt are intensifying in scale, thanks to the Social Democratic-Green coalition government.

Despite all warnings the social decline of broad sections of the population is deepening with attendant mass unemployment, poverty, fear for the future, ruthless competitiveness and a bitter process of selection in schools and society. Measures towards social equality; solidarity; and support and the integration into society of those in need—such values are today frowned upon and those who demand such measures are regarded as “old-fashioned” and conservative.

Notes:

1. In Germany, students are segregated at an early age into three kinds of high schools: the Hauptschule, offering the most basic education; the Realschule; and the Gymnasium, selective schools for those wishing to attend university. Robert was initially enrolled in a so-called Regelschule, a combination of the first two.

2. The Abitur is the highest leaving certificate school students can obtain after successful completion of their Gymnasium studies.