

Theo van Gogh murdered on the streets of Amsterdam

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Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam on Tuesday, November 2. The 47-year-old film director and publicist was shot and stabbed several times by his assassin on the streets of the Dutch capital. Van Gogh had made no secret of his sympathy for the policies and restrictive immigration policies of the party led by the right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn, who was himself murdered in May 2002.

The presumed assassin, Mohammed B., a 26-year-old Dutchman of Moroccan descent, first shot van Gogh, then stabbed him and left behind a note. According to newspaper reports the note called for a “holy war,” although a government release states that the text consisted merely of quotes from the Koran. In addition, the government confirmed that the assassin was already known to the Dutch secret service (AVID). However, he had only loose contacts with individuals who in turn had connections with fundamentalist groups.

Theo van Gogh had won a reputation in the Netherlands as an out-and-out provocateur. He had accused the Dutch writer Leon de Winter, for example, of exploiting his Jewishness to sell his books. During the ensuing nine-year legal battle, van Gogh “touched up” his accusations with the claim that during sex with his wife, de Winter entwined his penis with barbed wire and screamed “Auschwitz, Auschwitz.”

In his short film *Submission*, which was shown on Dutch television this past August, van Gogh adopted a similar provocative stance with regard to Islamism. According to news outlet *NZZ-online*, the film deals with “the suppression of women in an Islamic society dominated by men.” Alongside the act of rape within the family and the subsequent punishment for “adultery,” the short film also takes up the theme of arranged marriages. Use is made in the film of verses from the Koran, which are projected onto the bodies of women who are naked apart from a veil.

The script for *Submission* was written by a Dutch parliamentary deputy, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somalian national. She represents the right-wing Freedom and Democracy Party (VVD) in parliament and is known as a critic of Islamism. Following the showing of the film *Submission*, both Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh received murder threats over the Internet.

Van Gogh was in the process of completing work on his project *06-05*. In this film, which is scheduled for release at the

start of the coming year, van Gogh presents his own view of Pim Fortuyn as a man prepared to speak out unpleasant truths. Fortuyn is depicted as the victim of a plot that ended with his murder. The title of the film is derived from the day on which Fortuyn was killed, May 6.

Van Gogh has undertaken polemics against all religious communities, but in particular the Islamist, which he described as the biggest threat to the “civilised Western world.” He openly opposed a “multicultural social model,” which he declared to be illusory. Tolerance, in his opinion, had its limits.

Following the assassination of Pim Fortuyn, the killing of van Gogh represents the second politically motivated murder in Holland within the past two years. As was the case two years ago, the country has been shaken by this latest act of violence. On the day of the killing, 20,000 people gathered in Amsterdam to demonstrate in favour of freedom of expression and against violence as a means of dealing with political problems.

The fears of growing intolerance and violence are without doubt justified, and the murder of Van Gogh must be condemned. It is an act that only serves to encourage the most reactionary and right-wing forces. However, it is impossible to comprehend what has taken place without examining the changes in Dutch society as whole—changes that have come about under the current conservative government of Jan-Peter Balkenende as well as its social democratic predecessor.

Since the introduction of the so-called “Polder model” at the beginning of the 1980s, a profound polarisation has developed in Dutch society, a society formerly renowned for its openness and tolerance. Broad layers of the population have been condemned to poverty and insecurity. Immigrants and foreigners have been especially hard hit.

The political establishment has reacted to growing social tensions by scapegoating the most underprivileged layers of society. Such a development was already underway before the rise to prominence of the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF). However, following the spectacular electoral success of the LPF two years ago, all of the established parties adopted its restrictive immigration policies. The entire political spectrum—extending to the Socialist Party (SP)—lurched to the right with the message, “We have all we can take” (referring to immigrants). The murder of van Gogh took place against a background of

growing xenophobia encouraged by the establishment parties and large sections of the media.

Immigrants and refugees were put under enormous pressure. They were called upon to assimilate irrespective of whether they had just arrived in the country or had been living there for a long time. Government head Balkenende declared that Dutch values and norms were binding for all citizens. Only those prepared to integrate on this basis would be allowed to stay in the country. Such readiness to integrate was to be put to the test through language courses, paid for by the recipients. This development reached its peak with the decision by Rita Verdonk (VVD), Dutch integration minister, to deport 26,000 immigrants who had been denied the right to residency in rapidly conducted proceedings. Many of those expelled had lived in the country for more than five years.

The economic situation for many immigrants also means they are forced to the fringes of society. Unemployment amongst immigrants is four times as high as the national average, and 40 percent of all foreigners leave school without completing final exams.

At the same time, Holland has backed the US in its war of aggression against Iraq and sent troops to the country. The secret service has encouraged a climate of fear, citing the danger of terrorist attacks based on the country's military collaboration with the US and Great Britain. The Dutch government also supports the war being waged by Israel against the Palestinian people and has demanded that the Hamas movement be included on the list of terrorist organisations.

With his provocative onslaught against Islamism, Theo van Gogh threw oil on the flames. It was only a question of time before this explosive mixture detonated.

Though a large section of the Dutch population has condemned violence following the brutal murder, the government has used the attack to press ahead with beefing up its police operations and restrictive immigration policies.

Although Muslim organisations have condemned the murder, Holland's major-circulation daily papers declared such a declaration as insufficient and demanded a "clearer statement." Integration Minister Verdonk also joined in the chorus demanding such a statement.

Moroccan inhabitants of the country have stated in interviews that they fear the murder could lead to their expulsion from the country.

Although no concrete evidence has been presented, the police have stated they are exploring possible links to Al Qaeda. According to the police, eight persons were arrested November 3 in Amsterdam, including six Moroccans, a man from Algeria and a Spaniard of Moroccan origins. Police forced their way into a number of flats on the outskirts of Amsterdam, which they had already searched a year ago in connection with suicide bombings carried out in Casablanca. All of those arrested a year ago were later set free due to a lack of evidence against them, and none of this group were among those arrested by police last

week. The only link existing to the current batch of arrests is that in the investigations carried out a year ago the name van Gogh cropped up.

At the same time, the daily paper *De Telegraaf* published the names of five prominent persons allegedly included on a list of people to be murdered by the Islamic fundamentalist group to which Mohammed B. is presumed to be linked. The newspaper was unable to reveal the name of the organisation whose death list had been stumbled upon by detectives in the course of investigations.

The government is using fears that have been stoked up to strengthen its security and surveillance forces. Increased resources for the police and intelligence services, both in funds and personnel, as well as limitations on basic democratic rights, have been repeatedly justified on the basis of the fight against terrorism. Increased numbers of special police units have been stationed in the ghettos of Amsterdam, mainly inhabited by immigrants. These units are empowered to carry out stop-searches and arrests in those parts of the city assessed to be security risks.

Extreme-right, racist organisations have also taken advantage of the situation. On November 3, the youth organisation of the LPF and the Nieuwe Rechts (New Right) held their own demonstration protesting the van Gogh murder. Under the slogan "We have had enough," they called for the resignation of Interior Minister Johan Remkes (VVD) and the social democratic mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen. They accuse Remkes of failing to have sufficiently built up the police to prevent the assassination, and they condemn Cohen as a defender of policies of tolerance.

With the killing of Fortuyn and van Gogh, these extreme-right groups have declared that the time has come for "action," without explaining what they meant by such "action." According to press reports, VVD deputy Geert Wilder, the former VVD deputy who quit the party's parliamentary fraction two months ago, has announced he is preparing to found a new right-wing party.

Whatever one's opinion regarding the artistic and political activities of van Gogh, his murder demonstrates the reactionary nature of individual acts of terror as a form of politics. Van Gogh's murder only creates confusion within the population at large, which on the whole rejects both the murder and the antidemocratic measures of the Dutch government. It creates the conditions for an intensification of the government's attack on basic democratic rights. Legal and police powers are being strengthened under conditions in which the state will not hesitate to use such powers against the population as a whole.



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