

Germany: The murder of Hatun Sürütü and the debate over “honour killings”

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The murder of a young Turkish woman, Hatun Sürütü, in February 2005, has been followed one year later by a judgement of the Berlin regional court—and an aggressive campaign in sections of the German media and the political elite. The killing of the 23-year-old second-generation Turkish immigrant has horrified broad layers of the population.

Eighteen-year-old Ayhan, Hatun’s youngest brother, was sentenced to 9 years’ juvenile custody for the murder. The maximum penalty is 10 years. Her two older brothers, Alpaslan and Mutlu, were acquitted because of lack of evidence. The public prosecutor’s office has filed an appeal.

As a 15-year-old in 1998, Hatun Sürütü was taken out of high school in Germany and married to a cousin in Turkey. Following the birth of her child in Berlin, she refused to return to Turkey. Six months later, she left her parent’s home and began an apprenticeship as an electrical technician. She was married twice more and barely maintained contact with her family.

Ayhan had visited her on the day of the crime, and then killed her with three shots to the head on the way to the bus stop. According to the court, he had wanted to maintain family honour and acted with ice-cold intent. The court ruled it was malicious murder. Ayhan accepted full liability for the crime; other family members denied any participation. Two of Hatun’s brothers and sisters appeared as co-plaintiffs.

The prosecution was unable to prove that the older brothers shared responsibility for the crime. The evidence of the main prosecution witness, a former girlfriend of Ayhan, was ruled to be hearsay by the court—her account was essentially based on what she had allegedly been told by Ayhan and that could not be given any more weight than the statements of the two other accused, which had also exhibited inconsistencies.

The murder of a young mother by her juvenile brother is a terrible act, which raises complex questions about the social, cultural and political background of the case. However, neither the media nor official politics have shown any interest in clarifying these questions. Instead, the crime and the court’s ruling have been seized on by right-wing and clerical forces to generate anti-foreigner hostility and justify the call for a stronger state.

Firstly, it was alleged that the entire family had planned and carried out the killing, although the court concluded this could not be categorically proven.

The chairman of the German Evangelical Church (EKD), Bishop Wolfgang Huber, told the tabloid daily *Bild* he was “certain” that the brothers who had been acquitted were involved “in this crime.” One must assume that this was the “collective crime of a whole family,”

according to the bishop.

Green Party European parliamentary deputy Cem Özdemir echoed these remarks, criticising the court’s decision with the words, “If one knows that such cases are heard by the family courts and that the youngest [family member] is selected because it is expected he will receive a lighter punishment, then this judgement sends the wrong signal to society.”

From here it is only a small step to attribute the crime to Islam in general and foreigners’ supposed lack of readiness to integrate in particular.

Bishop Huber admitted that “neither the murder nor the image presented by the family are necessarily connected with Islam,” but added, however, that one had to “clearly state the differences [between Christians and Muslims] and convincingly stand up for our own values.” Huber had already used the recent controversy over cartoons of the prophet Mohammed to warn of the “violent forces in Islam.”

The Bavarian state premier, Edmund Stoiber (Christian Social Union—CSU), reacted to the judgement by repeating his longstanding demand that immigrants should accept “German culture,” including the German language, the acknowledgment of the state’s monopoly of power, and the equality of men and women. Those who refuse to integrate should be denied social security benefits and returned to their homeland, Stoiber told the magazine *Focus*.

The deputy chairman of the Christian Democratic faction in the Bundestag (parliament), Wolfgang Bosbach (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), demanded the collective punishment of the whole family—regardless of the outcome of the legal proceedings. In the *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, he called on the Berlin state government’s Aliens Office to expel “those involved in this deliberate and cold-blooded murder, regardless of the degree of punishment.” The domestic affairs spokesman for the CDU/CSU, Hans-Peter Uhl (CSU), demanded the creation of a criminal offence of foreigners “refusing to integrate.”

In view of the lack of objective evidence, it is difficult to reach a conclusive judgement over the murder of Hatun Sürütü. Nevertheless, there are sufficient indications to demonstrate the absurdity and dishonesty of the campaign that seeks to present this terrible crime as flowing from Islam or the refusal of foreigners to integrate into German society.

Firstly, it should be noted that, like Christianity, Islam does not sanction the murder of family members. Patriarchal family relations are a socio-cultural phenomenon. They are common in societies, both Christian and Islamic, that are marked by backwardness and poverty.

The equality of men and women was achieved as a result of the

Enlightenment *against* the influence of the Christian church and has still not been fully established. In areas where the church exerts a strong influence, patriarchal structures remain. It is absurd for the prime minister of Bavaria, Germany's most Catholic state, to present himself as the champion of women's emancipation. To the present day, the Catholic Church denies women the right to become priests, and to choose not to give birth to a child.

As far as the "refusal to integrate" is concerned, then such a criminal offence should indeed be introduced, but it should be applied exclusively to the German authorities and politicians who systematically exclude and discriminate against immigrants.

The Sürütü case highlights the fact that exclusion and discrimination contribute substantially to the revival of long overcome backward traditions in second- or third-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrants were able to integrate into German society relatively quickly, having jobs and participating in the workers' movement. This is much harder for their descendants, who face mass unemployment and the decline of the official workers' movement.

The Sürütü family was certainly not an inward-looking clan controlled by an all-powerful patriarch, living according to Islamic teachings. The father came to Germany in 1974 from east Anatolia; this Kurdish Sunni family had 10 children, of whom 1 died in an accident. The father was a baker by trade, and the family was held in "high regard." The children were born and grew up in Germany, and, according to the court report, the girls were also encouraged to attend school.

Under the government of Helmut Kohl in the 1990s, the family's new environment did not become a second homeland but instead an increasingly hostile place. Unemployment rose, in particular among foreigners, while leading politicians constantly stressed that Germany was not a "country of immigration." The unmistakable impression was given that those who had come from Turkey would always be Turks, and thus remain second-class citizens.

At the same time, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was abandoning its roots in the workers' movement. The trade unions and *betriebsrat* (works councils) acted increasingly as factors for order and the law and refused to defend even the most elementary social gains.

The Sürütü children, both culprit and victim, are not just the children of a devout father; they are also the children of German society. As they grew up, they experienced the anti-foreigner campaigns at the beginning of the 1990s, which culminated in the homicidal arson attacks of Mölln and Solingen, and in the campaigns against granting immigrants dual citizenship and for a "leading German culture" at the end of the 1990s. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a climate developed increasingly equating Muslims with terrorists and constantly placing them under general suspicion. This was accompanied by cuts in jobs, education and welfare, which affect immigrants the first and the hardest.

The members of the Sürütü family reacted to this situation like many other immigrant families: they alternated between attempts to adapt and attempts to find a place in society at any cost—whether it meant taking up educational studies or taking up a criminal career—accompanied by a retreat into religion and old traditions.

According to newspaper reports, the father now lives in Turkey most of the time. The oldest son was in jail for drug dealing at the time of the murder. Another studies law in Cologne, far away from Berlin. His wife does not wear a head scarf. Mutlu, one of the accused, is said to have had contact with radical Islamists. Another brother lives apart

from his wife.

Arzu, Hatun's sister, still lives at home, and is studying for a vocational qualification. She appeared as co-plaintiff and said after the trial that Ayhan no longer belongs to the family. Her request to look after Hatun's six-year-old son was met with hysterical reactions from politicians, church leaders and the media.

The older brothers all say there had been no contact for years with Hatun, and that they "could not care less" about their sister. Ayhan, who fired the deadly shots, stated that he had been angered by this state of affairs and Hatun's "immoral" life. He had abandoned his commercial apprenticeship and sought recognition in Islamic circles, and affected a ridiculous macho persona modelled on Hollywood mafia films. His brothers and the court report certify that the now 20-year-old is very immature.

Obviously, Ayhan could see no social perspective in German society and looked for this—in vain—in the barbaric ideology of "blood and honour." Such a reaction is not unusual among immigrant children. This could also explain how Ayhan acted without the knowledge of his family.

The sociologist Werner Schiffauer writes in this respect: "What is new is the stress on ethnicity, the display of consciousness as Turk, Arab, being a 'foreigner.' Young males in [Berlin's] Kreuzberg schools, it is reported, mob young Turkish women if they do not wear a head scarf. Remarks heard after the murder of Hatun Sürütü indicate this. At the Thomas Morus High School, near the scene of the murder, young people said that one could understand the culprit: 'She had only herself to blame. The whore behaved like a German.'

"This corresponds with a new self-image of juvenile migrants. The more they become native in Germany, the more they are conscious of exclusion.... What is decisive is the experiences of economic exclusion, social discrimination and the pressure for cultural adaptation.... The mixture of [living in] a peripheral social location in immigrant quarters and the consciousness of difference can result in a powerful concoction."

The answer of Bosbach, Stoiber and Co. is to intensify this development and increase the discrimination against immigrants. Nothing has been done to halt the social decline in immigrant areas; the social consequences are met with coercion and force. The ruling elite would dearly love to deport or lock up all those for whose poverty and neglect they are responsible.

Capitalist society cannot integrate the most oppressed layers and offer immigrants a genuine perspective. The result is an increase in crime, right-wing nationalism and religious fundamentalism. This can only be reversed when the working class takes responsibility for the fate of immigrant families and unites people of all nationalities and religions in the struggle for a democratic and socialist perspective.



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