

A terrible consequence of social polarisation and militarism

School shooting and suicide in Germany

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At 9:30 a.m. on Monday, November 20, a heavily armed 18-year-old man stormed into his former junior high school, Geschwister-Scholl, opened fire on students and threw smoke bombs, injuring more than 30 before taking his own life. The attack took place in the town of Emsdetten in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state.

Bastian B. entered the school wearing a combat mask and clad in black. He was armed with a suicide explosive belt, pipe bombs, smoke canisters, rifles and pistols as he burst into the school firing wildly at teachers and pupils. A female teacher was shot in the face with a non-lethal gas-powered gun. When the school's janitor came to her aid, Bastian B. shot him in the stomach with another gun. The janitor is now in hospital in critical condition.

Bastian B. then proceeded to shoot and wound four pupils. Most of the rest of the wounded, including a number of police officers, suffered asphyxiation from the smoke bombs he threw. Prior to November 20, he had announced his intention to carry out such an attack in a number of postings in the Internet.

The school shooting in Emsdetten is the latest in a series of outbursts of violence in German schools in recent years. In November 1999 a 15-year-old school student stabbed and killed his teacher in the East German town of Meissen. In April 2002, 19-year-old Robert Steinhäuser ran amok in his former school in the East German city of Erfurt, killing 17 people, including teachers, two pupils and one policeman. A few months before the Erfurt shooting Steinhäuser had been expelled from the town's Gutenberg-Gymnasium. The shooting was the worst single act of violence in Germany since World War II.

Just over a year later in the Bavarian town of Coburg, a 16-year-old youth wounded his teacher and then took his own life. And this year, on the evening of May 26, 16-year-old Mike P. used a knife to slash his way through a crowd, indiscriminately wounding over 30 people. The incident took place at the official opening of Berlin's new central railway station.

In a predictable fashion, leading politicians have joined sociologists to express their shock and astonishment at this "inexplicable" outrage. At the same time they have been quick to identify violent video games as a main contributing factor for Bastian B.'s behaviour. Politicians from across the political spectrum have called for a ban on video games, such as the war game Counterstrike, which Bastian B. is known to have played.

While such games can certainly contribute to stimulating atavistic and anti-social attitudes, the production and marketing of

such games is big business. Millions of copies of Counterstrike and similar games have been sold to young people all over the world, but it is only a handful of youth who resort to such terrible acts as the shooting in Emsdetten.

Monday's shooting was a despicable and deplorable act, but it was by no means inexplicable.

The deeper roots of such a crime lie in the rapidly developing social decline in Germany, which denies young people the prospect of a secure, harmonious and worthwhile life. Abandoned and ignored by the established political parties that are responsible for social disintegration and growing militarism, millions of youth—while deploring the brutal revenge killing by Bastian B.—nevertheless confront problems similar to those that produced the profound sense of social alienation, bitterness and desperation he must have felt.

Fellow students have confirmed that Bastian B. was an intelligent student who had in the past received good grades. However, he had developed a fascination with violence and killing, erecting his own Internet site where he posed dressed in combat gear and holding weapons. He had also told acquaintances he wanted to join the German army. At the same time in a number of comments on his web site he clearly outlined the basis for his growing frustration with the school system and society as a whole, which found such an explosive form.

"The only thing I learned intensively at school was that I'm a loser," he wrote. In another section he writes, "What's the point of working? Should I work myself to the bone, only to take retirement at 65 and then die five years later?"

With regard to the atmosphere in his school he wrote, "One has to have the latest handy (cell phone), the newest clothes and the right 'friends.' If you don't have them then one is not considered worthy of respect."

He concludes, "Life as it is today is the most miserable thing the world has to offer."

From his experiences Bastian B. draws the conclusion that humanity as a whole is to blame for this state of affairs, and had to be punished. In a final message he bid farewell to all of those who genuinely care for him and apologises for what he is about to do. The letter ends with the words, "I am gone."

Bastian B.'s comments on the lack of prospects in German society for working class youth are not plucked from thin air. Following the school atrocities in Meissen and Erfurt some commentators drew attention to the contributory role played in

such incidents by the devastation of industry, and the lack of full-time jobs and cultural alternatives afflicting large regions of Eastern Germany following reunification in 1990.

The recent debate on the emergence of a so-called “under class,” though predominantly of a right-wing character, has at least revealed that large swathes of western Germany are suffering from very similar forms of social decay and a haemorrhaging of decent-paying jobs in favour of more precarious forms of work.

The last report by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), based on outdated statistics from 2004, estimated the actual level of poverty in Germany to be 16 percent, which indicates an increase of nearly 5 percent since 1999. According to the institute, this total increased by half a percent in the course of 2005 alone—to 16.5 percent. The states of the former East Germany are even worse off, with poverty rates of 21.5 percent, though recent statistics reveal that some western regions are now as poor as the east.

In the postwar period the iron, steel and coal industries of the Ruhr industrial area played a major role in the German economic miracle. In recent decades, hundreds of thousands of jobs have been cut, and those industries have been reduced to skeletons of their former selves. Many towns and cities in North Rhine-Westphalia are plagued by high levels of unemployment, and youth unemployment in the state exceeds 20 percent. Under these conditions, levels of poverty in many regions of NRW certainly exceed the average rates given in the DIW report.

According to one recent study there has been an enormous increase in the growth of irregular, part-time and low-paid jobs. Workers in such jobs can earn as little as one euro per hour and lose any entitlement to proper health and pension insurance. Forced to take on a number of jobs to earn a survival wage, they are part of the rapidly-growing army of the “working poor.” In the eastern region of North Rhine-Westphalia there has been an increase of 34.9 percent in the number of such jobs between 2000 and 2005.

Young people leaving school are especially targeted for such work, while many others take on non-paid positions as apprentices or student trainees in the often vain hope of eventually obtaining full-time employment.

The enormous and rapid decline in work prospects for young people is the direct result of the social policies introduced by the forerunner of the current grand coalition government, the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green coalition government led by Gerhard Schröder and Joska Fischer from 1998 to 2005. It was this government that implemented the most sweeping and vicious attacks on the welfare state in German postwar history. In his Internet comments Bastian B. expressed his fears of working in a dead-end job until he was 65. In fact, Germany’s current vice chancellor, Franz Müntefering of the SPD, is agitating for the retirement age to be raised to 67.

Today in Germany it is not necessary to load a video game to encounter military violence in the most brutal form. Alongside tens of millions of other Europeans, the German public have witnessed countless images on television screens over the past few years depicting the horrendous violence arising from the military occupation of Iraq.

Only recently, newspaper reports in Germany dealt with the case of US soldiers involved in the rape of a young Iraqi girl and the subsequent cold-blooded execution of the rape victim and members of her family. Mimicking scenes from the resistance to the occupation of Iraq, which millions have seen on television or via the internet, Bastian B. garbed himself with a suicide belt of explosives to take revenge on those he so very falsely assumed to be his enemy.

At the same time, the German establishment is in the midst of its own debate, in which media outlets and leading political and military circles are stressing the need for an intensified military involvement by Germany all over the world.

On the very same day as the outrage in Emsdetten one of Germany’s most popular weekly news magazines, *Der Spiegel*, appeared with a front-page cover of a young German soldier garbed in almost identical fashion to the Bastian B. in the pictures of himself, decked out in military fatigues, that he posted on the Internet. The headline spelled out in large characters, “The Germans Have to Learn How to Kill.” The accompanying article dealt with increasing international pressure for Germany to send troops into the war zone of southern Afghanistan.

The same SPD-Green government that introduced drastic cuts to Germany’s welfare state, and which has exposed millions of youth and workers to new levels of poverty and exploitation, was also responsible for the enormous growth in recent German military involvement abroad. The German army currently has a total of over 10,000 soldiers on active duty in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The number of casualties from such deployments has also grown. A total of 56 German soldiers have died over the past eight years, with most of the deaths occurring in Afghanistan.

The inevitable brutalisation of these young recruits was recently highlighted by the publication of a number of photographs of German soldiers posing with a human skull and simulating oral sex with it. Some soldiers daubed their vehicles with slogans and symbols similar to those of the Nazi Wehrmacht.

Not content with military interventions in three continents, the new Grand Coalition government of the Christian Democratic Union-Christian Social Union and the SPD is preparing for a qualitative expansion of its imperialist activities abroad. It has recently published a White Paper detailing the new tasks and responsibilities of the German army in the twenty-first century.

Thus, amidst the feigned outrage over the Afghan photos and the professions of astonishment over the Emsdetten shootings, the government and the army high command are preparing for ever worse crimes that will brutalise thousands more young people and serve in an effort to accustom the German public to death and suffering on a scale not seen since the downfall of the Third Reich.



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