

Winnenden rampage killings

What lies behind the latest school shooting in Germany?

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He was supposed to have been a quiet, friendly, rather withdrawn and shy but likeable type of person. According to his friends, former classmates and neighbours, 17-year-old Tim K., who shot dead 15 people and then himself last Wednesday, seemed to be a nice, polite young man.

Nor did photographs of his sensitive, rather childlike face give the least impression of an aggressive personality. A former classmate, Linda, who was in the same class with him for five years, told *Der Spiegel's* internet publication that she might have suspected quite a few others of being capable of violence, but "certainly not him."

Winnenden's Albertville High School, 20 kilometres northeast of Stuttgart, had often been described as exemplary. The town's education facilities, which also comprise a grammar school and another secondary school, include their own specialised social worker. Her office was right next to the student cafeteria where darts and table-football were played and which was off-limits to teachers. In order to readily spot and deal with any potential conflict, some pupils were trained to act as so-called mediators.

All this only intensified people's shock and horror at the grisly deed and the cold-bloodedness with which Tim K. carried it out. An eyewitness said he acted with complete self-assurance "as though he felt he was doing exactly the right thing."

Masked, dressed in black and armed with a Beretta semi-automatic pistol and hundreds of bullets, he walked into his former school and killed three female teachers, a male pupil and eight female pupils, apparently with shots deliberately aimed at the head. When the police arrived, he took flight, shot dead a passerby and then forced a car to take him to the town of Wendingen, about 40 kilometres away. On the way, the driver managed to escape by jumping out of the moving car.

On reaching a car dealer showroom, Tim K. demanded a vehicle and then killed the salesman and a customer and wounded two policemen. As he left the building, he was shot by the police and then turned his weapon on himself. The horrific outcome of his rampage was 16 dead and numerous wounded.

Since then, possible motives and other issues related to the killings have been discussed in political circles and the media. Germany's federal president and chancellor have expressed their dismay and extended sympathy to relatives of those killed;

Christian Social Union (CSU) politicians have called for a ban on violent computer games; the Social Democratic Party (SDP) has demanded more rigorous supervision of shooting clubs, since it became known that the assassin's father was a competitive shooter and owned 16 weapons; and the police trade union is complaining about security gaps in the control of weapons.

Directly after the bloodbath, scheduled television shows were interrupted and replaced by special programmes in which experts discussed, among other things, the merits of a more stringent monitoring of schools, the introduction of metal detectors, the use of security firms to search pupils at school entrances, stricter control over the internet by monitoring chat room conversations and blocking access to some web sites.

In the course of these talk shows and special programmes, broadcasters repeatedly displayed a picture of the schoolyard on which, in the middle of a sea of candles, lay a poster with the word: "Why?" The chairman of the council of the Evangelical Church of Germany, Bishop Wolfgang Huber, was frequently quoted as saying: "It is now time to take stock of our pain and bewilderment and seek refuge and support from God."

Initial attempts to explain the tragedy by claiming that Tim K. had left the school in a state of anger because he had failed final examinations the previous year soon had to be withdrawn. He had, in fact, passed his final exams quite well and went on to attend a business course at a vocational college. Apart from this, he succeeded in other areas of life. Ever since childhood he was an enthusiastic table tennis player and won numerous awards in his chosen sport.

Another assertion—that Tim K. had announced his intention to commit his bloody deed in an internet chat room the evening before—also turned out to be based on a false report.

Instead, it was confirmed that he was undergoing medical treatment for depression. His doctors, however, apparently thought his psychological problems expressed a degree of self-doubt and aggressiveness that are widely observable in youngsters of his age.

It is also known that Tim was not particularly happy at school. But it would be pure speculation to assume that this was the result of his depression or violent fantasies.

Based on the fact that Tim K. killed mostly women and girls at the school, speculation about the ending of a relationship with a girlfriend arose directly after the crime. Others supposed that the

killing spree in Alabama the previous night might have inspired him to commit his deed.

Some have sought to place the principal blame on the father, Jörg K., because the weapon used in the crime came from his gun collection, which was not properly locked away. Neighbours and friends of Jörg K., the managing director of a packing firm with 150 employees, denied that he was negligent, describing him rather as ambitious and "rather strict."

Quite a few details have yet to be explained. However, it is obvious that the tragedy in Winnenden cannot be understood in isolation from broader social developments. Whoever tries to find its root causes in the depths of human psychology or to hold parents, teachers, doctors or friends primarily responsible is evading the most crucial issues.

Social conditions are not reflected in the behaviour of individuals in a direct, immediate manner. The relationship between social processes and individual behaviour is complex and contradictory. Nevertheless, the relationship does exist.

Rampage killings—not exclusively, but most frequently in schools—have increased significantly in the United States and Europe over the last 15 years. When two American teenagers shot dead 12 pupils, a teacher and then themselves at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado, 10 years ago, many people saw it as a typically American problem.

Five years later, Robert Steinhäuser shot to death 12 teachers and 5 more victims at his former school in Erfurt, Germany. Legislation on weapons control was immediately tightened and other measures taken to prevent the emergence of "American conditions" in local schools.

Since then, the number of rampages has increased:

* November 20, 2006: In Emsdetten, an 18-year-old boy sprayed bullets around his former school. Eleven people were wounded. The perpetrator shot and killed himself.

* February 12, 2007: At least 10 people were killed in rampages in Salt Lake City and Philadelphia. A man opened fire at a shopping centre in Salt Lake City, killing 5 people. A policeman shot the rampager. In Philadelphia, three participants of a business conference became victims of a crazed gunman. The gunman then took his own life.

* April 16, 2007: A student shot dead 32 people and wounded a further 15 at Virginia Tech University. This remains the worst school massacre in the history of the United States.

* September 23, 2008: A 22-year-old vocational college student killed 10 people in the small western Finnish town of Kauhajoki. He then killed himself.

* November 7, 2008: In Finland, an 18-year-old pupil killed 8 people at an education centre in Jokela.

* January 23, 2009: A 20-year-old Belgian stabbed to death two small children and a supervisor at a day care centre in the East Flemish town of Dendermonde. Ten more children and two more supervisors were wounded, some severely.

The latest rampage—occurring at virtually the same time as the massacre in Alabama, where a 28-year-old man shot and killed 10 people, including his entire family—must be seen as part of this broader development. The mounting violence is a reflection of the increasing dehumanisation and militarisation of the whole of

society—in the US, Europe and worldwide.

Politicians who are now exploiting the situation to call for the prohibition of "killer" computer games are confusing cause and effect. The wide proliferation of increasingly brutal computer games is itself a sign of the increasing brutalisation of society.

This dehumanising trend and its effects on the psychology of young people can be observed without recourse to the existence of violent computer games. It can be witnessed at peak viewing or listening times in news broadcasts. Only a few weeks ago, pictures and film reports about the Israeli army's onslaught against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip dominated the news media. Hundreds of civilians were butchered in extreme displays of brutality.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who proclaims her horror at the bloodbath in Winnenden, declared at the time her unreserved support for the military terror tactics of the Israeli army. She as well as the whole political establishment and major sections of the media are primarily to blame for the social decay and cultural impasse that led to such tragic events as that in Winnenden.

Military violence is accompanied by everyday violence within society. More and more people are driven into dire poverty by unemployment, low-paying jobs and social cutbacks. At the same time, a wealthy elite continues to live in uninhibited, ostentatious luxury. The government, the political parties and the judiciary uphold this constantly growing social inequality. While human solidarity and strivings toward social equality are systematically suppressed and undermined, self-interest, egotism and a lack of social conscience are heralded as virtues.

By resorting to a killing spree, Tim K. gave expression in an extreme way to what society had taught him: One overcomes one's problems through the exercise of terror and violence.

The contradiction between his likeable personality and the hate-driven aggression that had accumulated beneath the surface reflects in a curious way a social reality. Beneath the apparently calm surface of daily life, contradictions are increasing enormously. These contradictions, however, fail to find expression and release in official politics—until they burst to the surface in an explosion of violence.



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