

Techno music festival disaster—those responsible deny all charges

Lena Sokoll
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Five days after with the Love Parade techno music festival in Duisburg, which ended with 21 dead, 500 injured and thousands traumatised, a demonstration took place this Thursday outside city hall. The protest was directed against all those political and administrative figures responsible for last Saturday's disaster, first and foremost the mayor of Duisburg, Adolf Sauerland (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

It was already clear at the press conference held one day after the disaster that those responsible would attempt to deny any blame. Mayor Sauerland said that his city had "been struck by a tragic misfortune" and warned against "over-hasty accusations". He has since rejected demands for his resignation, arguing that this would be tantamount to admitting his guilt.

There was particular anger at Sauerland's comments made just hours after the deaths, when he referred to "individual weaknesses" by festival participants which had led to the disaster. His comments sought to make the victims into authors of their own misfortune. At the same time, Sauerland denied there were any doubts raised about the security of the festival. "I was not aware of any warnings," he told the *Rheinischen Post*.

It is now a matter of record that Sauerland had exerted enormous pressure that the Love Parade go ahead in Duisburg. In so doing, he had swept aside the doubts expressed by members of the city administration, the town council, police and fire brigade, as well as many individual city residents. For example, the director of the Duisburg fire brigade had addressed a letter to Sauerland, in which he warned that the area at the old railway goods station was "physically unsuitable" for an event of this dimension.

Minutes have also been released of a discussion between representatives of the city of Duisburg, the fire brigade and the organisers of the Love Parade, Lopavent

GmbH, which makes clear that serious doubts were raised concerning the unsuitable escape routes, but that the mayor "wished the event to go ahead, and that therefore a solution had to be found".

Sauerland was not the only one, however, who desperately wanted to win the "mega-event" for Duisburg, despite the fact that the densely built city with 500,000 inhabitants was obviously unsuitable for a mass gathering at which more than 1 million people were expected. State politicians and the heads of the European Capital of Culture Ruhr.2010 project exerted pressure on the city of Duisburg to ensure that the Love Parade went ahead and it not be cancelled due to security reasons, as was the case in the city of Bochum one year earlier.

The former Social Democratic Party (SPD) chair of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and its current prime minister, Hannelore Kraft, demanded that this "piece of youth culture" not be endangered. Ruhr.2010 head Fritz Pleitgen also declared that Duisburg could not afford to call off the event.

At the start of 2009, CDU MP Thomas Mahlberg had written to the NRW interior minister at the time, Ingo Wolf (Free Democratic Party, FDP), recommending the dismissal of the Duisburg chief of police, Rolf Cebin, because the later had declared: "Outstanding security problems stand in the way of carrying out the Love Parade in 2010."

Mahlberg wrote in his letter: "The result is negative reporting throughout the republic. I ask you, Dr. Wolf, which drives the Duisburg chief of police to take such an attitude?... The recent éclat leads me to request that Duisburg be freed from a heavy burden and dare to undertake a change of personnel in the Duisburg police headquarters. In the interests of people living in Duisburg and in the interests of the police."

In the meantime, both Mayor Sauerland and Love Parade organiser Rainer Schaller have made serious accusations against the police. Schaller, who runs the main sponsor of the Love Parade, the fitness chain McFit, has claimed that the disaster was the result of a “fatal instruction” by police officers to open the western tunnel entrance. For their part, the police accuse the organiser of employing far too few, completely under-qualified security staff and have referred to earlier doubts raised by police sources. NRW Interior Minister Ralf Jäger also blames the organiser for not abiding by the event’s security concept and therefore permitting the mass panic.

Jäger does not explain, however, why his Interior Ministry did not intervene to stop the techno festival following the doubts raised by senior police sources. Police protocols also reveal that police forces outside the city of Duisburg had warned that the festival would end in chaos if allowed to go ahead.

One police chief based in the city of Cologne told the newspaper *Express*, “There were 12 to 13 local meetings in Duisburg. And every time we were united in our opinion that the planned concept would end in chaos with deaths and injuries.” All doubts were ignored, the official reports: “We were just informed time and time again, there was to be no discussion. City hall was of the opinion: The Love Parade has to happen.”

The fact that this deadly disaster was so foreseeable makes it a crime. Mayor Sauerland, the organisers, as well as those authorities responsible for security seek to deny any blame because they are fearful of the legal consequences.

As some of the demonstrators in front of the Duisburg city hall noted, the resignation of Sauerland will change nothing. What is necessary is a detailed investigation of the circumstances that led to the festival area being turned into a death trap for so many. Above all, the role of the different authorities, particularly that of the city administration and the organiser, must be clarified.

The city administration, headed by the mayor, approved a major event for an arena that was evidently unsuitable due to its size and lacked adequate escape routes. The first question that has to be addressed is how it could permit such a gathering.

While there can be no doubt that Schaller, Sauerland

and his departmental heads did not intend there to be dead and injured, they subordinated the issue of security to profit motives and the bid to gain prestige—with the most terrible consequences. The disaster in Duisburg therefore raises not only the issue of the guilt and responsibility of individuals, but the underlying social conditions as well.

The deaths of the young victims are shocking not only because they were cruel and senseless, but also because in the long run they were taken into account in the calculations of those responsible. The lives and well-being of those taking part were a subordinate issue when the decision was taken to allow the Love Parade to proceed.



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