

# Germany: One year after the Love Parade disaster

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Last Sunday marked the first anniversary of the Love Parade music festival disaster in Duisburg. On July 24, 2010, 21 mostly young people were crushed to death at the single narrow entrance and exit to the grounds where the concert took place. More than 500 people were injured and countless more traumatised. Over the weekend, several observances were held in Duisburg in memory of the victims.

Quite soon after the catastrophe it was obvious it had not simply been the result of an unfortunate chain of events, or merely negligence on the part of the authorities and the organisers. It was a disaster that has been thoroughly documented and whose causes are well known. Yet nobody has been brought to account, and Mayor Adolf Sauerland (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), who bears the major political responsibility, is still in office.

The organisers and politicians involved had ruthlessly disregarded the doubts and warnings raised by experts in advance of the event. A 452-page interim report of the Duisburg public prosecutor investigating the matter asserts that official permission for the Love Parade was “unlawful” and “should never have been granted”.

The Lopavent promotional firm of Rainer Schaller, owner of the McFit fitness chain, subordinated any concerns about the major event to the company’s potential profit-takings. Numerous obligations were violated in order to minimise costs, for example, the requirement to “ensure security by equipping the entire area with a system of loudspeakers”.

By the day of the Love Parade, however, no public address system had been erected. According to a statement given by a police officer, an employee of Lopavent justified this by claiming that the cable runs would have been too long. The firm promoting the event also engaged fewer stewards than had been agreed. The prosecutor investigated four of Lopavent’s employees, initially under suspicion of negligent homicide and assault, but not Schaller himself.

The police also made mistakes that at least contributed to the scale of the disaster. Kuno Simon, head of police, is listed as a defendant in the public prosecutor’s interim report. The report paints “a picture of police units hopelessly overwhelmed by the situation”, commented the *Rheinische Post*. Concerning Detlef von Schmeling, the deputy chief of the Duisburg police at the time, the prosecutor writes, “It is not currently known if or when the deputy chief of police was present in the operations centre of Duisburg police headquarters”.

The report also declares that “a prior right of cellular radio communication for the police was neither requested nor activated”, despite this being the usual practice at such big events. The cost of setting up such a priority communication circuit would have been high. The North Rhine-Westphalia Interior Ministry, headed by the native Duisburger Ralf Jäger (Social Democratic Party, SPD), had

submitted several testimonies relieving the ministry and the police of responsibility. The prosecution’s interim report describes how the decision not to apply for the appropriate mobile communication system was taken against the ministry’s better judgement.

The public prosecutor attributes key responsibility to the city administration and its departmental authorities. Mayor Sauerland had vigorously engaged himself in the Love Parade project in Duisburg, appointing his head of public safety, Wolfgang Rabe (CDU), to push for its staging in the face of all objections.

The investigators accused Rabe of having “been aware of all the danger points” when authorisation for the event was sought. Nevertheless, he “pressed” for permission for the Love Parade to take place.

The city building authority department had repeatedly refused to grant permission for the Love Parade. The department head was subsequently transferred. When an administrative assistant criticised the narrow escape route, Rabe rebuked her by insisting the mayor wanted the event staged, and it would be better for her to “cooperate constructively”. Rabe also brushed aside safety concerns voiced by the police and fire fighters.

The most senior official—after Sauerland—at the building authority department was Jürgen Dressler (SPD), who had recently left his post as the head of the city planning and construction department. In a handwritten note about a month before the Love Parade, he had denied that the building authority department was responsible for the project, observing, “The decision in all matters is incumbent on II”. The “II” stood for the department of public safety, headed by Rabe.

Following a conference on fire safety, the limiting of visitor numbers and procedures for evacuation of people from the Love Parade grounds, Dressler had prepared this memo in the hope of avoiding any subsequent prosecution. However, he was regarded with “initial suspicion” by the Duisburg prosecutor. Dressler was accused of “failure to act”. The prosecution’s report indicated, “None of the aforementioned building authority employees involved was in attendance on the day of the event”. There was therefore no supervision of the conditions of the authorisation and the restrictions it imposed.

The prosecutor opened proceedings against nine other city employees in addition to Rabe and Dressler, but not against Mayor Sauerland.

As a result, the mayor has been the primary target of resentment and anger among the population. Immediately after the Love Parade disaster, he tried to blame the victims themselves for their deaths, claiming they had climbed up the entrance walls in an attempt to escape, fallen back down, and thereby unleashed the panic.

To date, Mayor Sauerland has rejected any political responsibility for the disaster. Had the Love Parade been a success, he would have boasted about his part in its promotion. Now he claims to be innocent of any crime as mayor of the city. Just two weeks ago, he finally confessed “to a moral responsibility” for a situation in which relatives of the dead and Love Parade visitors had to bear witness to the mutual recriminations of those responsible, in addition to suffering their own grief.

To further bolster their supposed innocence, the city authorities set up a €300,000 “sympathy fund” to be administered by the legal chambers of their close associates, Dr. Ute Jasper and Andreas Berstermann. However, victims and survivors are still awaiting compensation. Jaspers threatened the Duisburg Internet blog, Xtranews, with a fine of €250,000 for publishing internal documentary information about the sympathy fund, which included plans, minutes of meetings, etc., that provided credible insight into the authorisation process.

The city paid the former editor of *Focus* magazine and PR consultant Karl Heinz Steinkühler large sums of money—up to €2,000 a day—to improve the image of the city officials, especially that of Adolf Sauerland himself. But the results were far from successful. Relatives of the victims did not want Sauerland to appear at the commemorative events this weekend.

Leaders of the Duisburg Greens are therefore proclaiming their support for Sauerland all the more vehemently. Aided by the CDU City Council faction, the Greens last year prevented the mayor from being voted out of office, as demanded by a citizens’ initiative armed with 10,000 signatures. The dual chairmanship of the Greens’ council faction, Dieter Kantel and Doris Janicki, said at the time, “There is currently no reason to accord the mayor any personal blame”.

Adolf Sauerland came to see Peter Greulich as his best friend. Greulich, a Green, is the Duisburg city director and has also recently assumed the responsibility of temporarily replacing Dressler as head of the city planning and construction department. He stands firmly in support of Sauerland, giving joint television interviews with him and defending him. Almost a year after the Love Parade tragedy, Greulich also brought Sauerland into contact with some of the relatives of the victims. Previously, all efforts to that effect had failed on Sauerland’s part.

Only recently, a local general meeting of the Greens adopted a resolution endorsing the de-selection of Sauerland by 21 votes to 18. A second attempt to vote Sauerland out of office is possible due to a change in law by the SPD-Green state government under Hannelore Kraft (SPD). While the city council had to agree to the mayor’s de-selection in the first attempt to vote him out, it is now possible to enforce his departure via a petition.

According to this so-called “Lex Sauerland”, legal application for de-selection requires the signatures of at least 15 percent of eligible voters—amounting to some 55,000 in Duisburg—and the collection of these within a period of four months. This would not pose a problem in Sauerland’s case. However, the SPD-Green government has raised the hurdles for achieving the mayor’s ousting to such an extent that the law could in time prove to be to the detriment of the party itself. De-selection now requires the votes of 25 percent of the electorate, i.e., about 90,000 votes in Duisburg. Were the vote to be taken at the present time, this number would still be reached.

Sauerland is not the only problem. The victims of the Love Parade in Duisburg are confronted by a broad alliance of big business, racketeers and political parties, who subordinated the safety and lives

of the Love Parade participants to their own economic and political interests.

In an interview with the *Rheinische Post* in February 2010, Sauerland’s loyal assistant Rabe pointed out not unduly that all the city council parties in 2007—including the Left Party—had voted in favour of holding the Love Parade concert. This had not only been an “issue of [the city’s] image”, but also a question of money. “Initial estimates lead us to expect a positive outcome, amounting to €500,000 to €1,000,000”, said Rabe.

As is so often the case with such disasters, the state of the whole of society is reflected in the Duisburg tragedy and the reaction of those responsible. The profound irresponsibility toward hundreds of thousands of mainly young people, whose welfare and safety was of no genuine interest to the city leaders or the business community, is not limited to Duisburg and the tragic events of last year. It is characteristic of large sections of the ruling class in business, politics and public administration.

Millions of working families in Europe are currently being made to pay for the consequences of an international economic crisis that is the responsibility of the banks, their fund managers and stock market speculators. The high-handed arrogance and bureaucratic ruthlessness expressed in this global travesty finds its counterpart in Duisburg, where one in seven residents is dependent on miserly Hartz IV unemployment benefits and related services.

Indebted to the extent of €1.7 billion, the city will be paying €430 million to the banks for “interest and other financial charges” alone over the next four years. No money was said to be available, however, when 15 students from the Turkish city of Aydin wanted to visit Duisburg as part of an exchange programme earlier this month. A year ago, about 15 young people from Duisburg were warmly received in Turkey, but Duisburg’s city authorities have now cancelled the return visit due to an alleged lack of funds. The state of North Rhine-Westphalia had cut its former student exchange grant of €6120 to €2493.

Karl Janssen (CDU), head of the city’s department for families, education and culture, said, “My hands are tied; I’m not allowed to release the money”. When it came to authorisation of the Love Parade, however, none of those responsible declared they were required to observe laws, regulations, safety guidelines and legal restrictions. All such concerns were brushed aside. But this irresponsibility also came at a cost: the lives of 21 concert visitors.



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