

New evidence points to German police involvement in 1967 murder of student protester

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New evidence suggests that student protester Benno Ohnesorg was deliberately killed by police officer Karl-Heinz Kurras in June 1967 during a demonstration against a visit by the Shah of Iran. This follows a systematic cover-up campaign by the West Berlin police that resulted in Kurras' acquittal.

Ohnesorg was killed by a shot to the head during clashes at the Berlin demonstration. What many have suspected for over forty years has been borne out by recent investigations by state attorneys and research by news magazine *Der Spiegel*.

The case against Kurras, who was twice acquitted (1967, 1970), was reopened in 2009. The starting point for the resumption of the investigation by the Berlin prosecutor's office and the attorney general were Stasi documents showing that Kurras was an "unofficial employee" for the East German (GDR) State Security agency. The suspicion is that Kurras might have even been acting on behalf of the Stasi on that day in 1967, but such speculation has not yet been confirmed by further research.

Based on new information, which came to light through investigations of the Stasi, and as a result of *Spiegel's* own meticulous research, at the end of January 2012 the magazine published a comprehensive and detailed account of the crime and the subsequent course of events. Although, according to state prosecutors, this new information does not warrant a new trial—either the witnesses have died or are no longer able or willing to be questioned, and the video and photographic evidence alone is not enough—one thing becomes clear: the testimony of Kurras, his superior and squad leader at the demonstration, Helmut

Starke, and many other key police witnesses does not tally with the new photographic evidence.

This centres on a photo by *B.Z.* (the Berlin tabloid newspaper) reporter Wolfgang Schöne, in which Kurras can be clearly seen at the left edge of the frame. According to *Spiegel*, Schöne is "a good friend of Kurras, [and] also a good friend of Starke, who regularly supplied the crime reporter with tip-offs." The photo itself is not new, and has already been published in newspapers; it shows the squad leader Starke shortly after the shooting, looking towards the camera, shocked. Behind him, Benno Ohnesorg lies on the ground. Up to now, the photo had been manipulated and was published without showing Kurras. The original picture now proves that immediately after the crime, Kurras was standing together with colleagues in the vicinity of the severely injured Ohnesorg. Kurras has always claimed he only learned about the shooting the following day from television reports.

The right-wing Springer Publishing House (which publishes *B.Z.*) led the media witch-hunt in the 1960s, defaming protesting students as terrorists. The manipulation of the photo was part of this deliberate campaign, in which the Springer interests did not shrink from covering up a murder to defend the interests of the West German establishment.

Other photos show that Kurras, Starke and other police officers, as well as key witnesses such as Horst Geier, were close enough to have visual contact with the victim at the time of the crime. Their statements that they had not seen each other and did not know that a police officer had fired the shot are now exposed as false, intended to exonerate Kurras. The images suggest that all of them were involved from the start and knew

the circumstances of the crime.

From the new images, it is also apparent that Kurras acted neither in defence nor in panic, but calmly and deliberately shot the victim from close range. New analysis of an old video tape dimly shows him, holding a shiny object in his hand, looking like a firearm, as he enters the courtyard of Krumme Street 66/67 alone, the scene of the shooting. Although Kurras has been twice acquitted of manslaughter, the new evidence points to his deliberate execution of Benno Ohnesorg. The new investigations also show that police officials, as well as the shoddy work of the state prosecutor, played a major role in the cover-up.

Witnesses such as police officer Paul-Gerhard Schulz, on whom Kurras seems to be leaning in another photo taken immediately before the shooting, were only subject to internal police interviews by telephone. Other witnesses were not even questioned. The magazine *Focus* reported that the worker Herbert Dieters had seen a group of men discussing on the road immediately after the event. He said the discussion was about a gun and a badge. Although Dieters had twice reported what he saw to the police, his testimony was apparently of no interest to the district police or later to the prosecution.

In the course of the proceedings, 83 witnesses were interrogated. None of them substantiated the testimony of Kurras regarding the circumstances that allegedly led to the shooting. Most said they had neither seen nor knew anything. Dieters was never even questioned. There is merely a note about him in the Berlin prosecutors' 2009 investigation files.

Evidence already existed in 1967 indicating the possibility of a criminal cover-up of the murder. For example, the piece of Benno Ohnesorg's skull where the bullet had struck was removed, and the wound sewn over. Ohnesorg's death certificate listed "death by blunt trauma" as the cause. The new evidence now puts the incident in a wider context. There are strong indications that state bodies such as the mobile and criminal police forces have deliberately and systematically engaged in cover-ups and made false statements to hide the murderers within their own ranks. At the very least, the investigating prosecutors have exposed gross negligence and errors on the part of the police.

The case of Benno Ohnesorg is not an isolated one.

Right to the present day, there are cases in which the German police cover up for the violent acts of their colleagues. Recently, police officers employed brutality against the participants at a demonstration in memory of Oury Jalloh, the asylum seeker burned to death in 2005 under mysterious circumstances in a prison cell in Dessau. This case is also full of contradictory statements. Important evidence has disappeared, and the investigation can only be described as careless in the extreme.

According to reports by Amnesty International in 2004 and 2010, in many cases where police violence was reported, the actions of the officers were never clarified, a thorough criminal investigation not made or begun too late, and not all evidence collected or investigations expeditiously undertaken.

How deeply the state agencies are involved in the cover-up and concealment of crimes is shown by the latest revelations about the "National Socialist [Nazi] underground", consisting of the three right-wing terrorists from Zwickau—Mundlos, Zschäpe and Böhnhardt. For more than ten years, the three were able to use an extensive network, which included undercover informants, to rob and murder.

The closeness of the police and intelligence agencies to right-wing circles in Germany has a long history. The student protests of the 1960s were mainly directed against the crimes of the Nazis and those responsible for their terror. After the war, many of these same people were again able to enjoy the privileges of public office, the judiciary and big business. In November 1966, just six months before the murder of Benno Ohnesorg, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former member of Hitler's Nazi party, became chancellor of West Germany.



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