

Germany: Turkish mother and seven children killed in fire

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13 March 2013

In the early hours of Sunday morning in Backnang, near Stuttgart in Baden-Württemberg, a fire broke out in an old leather factory used as a residency and business complex. The fire claimed the lives of eight people—a 40-year-old mother of Turkish origin and seven of her ten children. The children were aged between six months and 16 years. One of the children, an 11-year-old boy, and two other relatives were rescued prior to the arrival of firefighters.

Christos Kiroglou, a Greek who runs the Merlin club behind the house, broke open a door enabling the three children to escape. He told reporters, “Everyone did what they could until the fire brigade arrived.”

Police hermetically sealed off the site of the incident. Turkish TV broadcast units were parked in front of the barrier. Reporters accompanied by camera teams interviewed relatives and residents on the street opposite the burned house. Families paid their respects and laid flowers under a tree.

This reporter spoke with Cengiz Soykan, the visibly shocked uncle of the deceased children, in front of the ruins of the house. He said the house was uninhabitable before the fire and that only foreigners would be forced to live in such deplorable conditions. The house was more than 200 years old and lacked basic facilities. The grandmother had visited the ruins and found nothing remaining. Soykan said his brother had tried to raise a big family on his small income and could afford nothing better. Now we all see the results of such poverty, he said bitterly. Soykan said that he has lived in the town of Backnang for a long time and had witnessed many hostile attacks against the Turkish community. In 1983, a mosque was burned down, and the local Turkish club was set on fire in 1995. Just a few weeks ago, garbage bins in front of the nearby mosque were set on fire. Soykan hoped that neo-Nazis

were not responsible for the fire because that would only make the tragedy worse.

The infrastructure of the entire building complex, including houses, shops and a German-Turkish cultural club, is in a devastated condition. The landlord had failed to carry out necessary repairs for decades despite numerous requests by the tenants. A former tenant at the scene of the fire declared that he had quit the building with his family due to the intolerable conditions.

The family of the victims lived in the house for more than two years and had regularly made temporary repairs to the house. The grandmother of the deceased children said that several requests to repair disintegrated electric wiring remained unanswered.

On many occasions the mother, who was bringing up the children alone, approached the German authorities appealing for new accommodation with better living conditions. The office for youth welfare visited the house repeatedly and was aware of the destitute conditions of the family.

Within hours of the incident, a police spokesperson rejected any notion that the tragedy was the result of a politically motivated right-wing extremist attack and declared that the probable cause of the fire was a defect in the wood-burning oven and substandard electric wiring. The state attorney and police had been informed of the incident, but “the investigation would certainly take days, if not weeks.”

The Turkish government and Turkish organisations in Germany immediately expressed their doubts about this hasty announcement by the police and demanded a full investigation.

The Turkish-Islamic Union (DITIB) claimed in a statement: “Only a rapid, transparent and credible investigation can prevent unnecessary speculation. The

memory of what took place in the attack in Mölln remains fresh in our memories.”

A statement by the Turkish Foreign Ministry read: “While the German authorities have, following the preliminary inspections, notified us that there weren’t any racist element involved in the incident, a rigorous and serious investigation is needed as many [Turkish] nationals have lost their lives following fires caused by xenophobic motives in previous years.”

In November 1992, extreme right-wingers set fire to two houses of Turkish families in Mölln. Eight people were badly burned and admitted to hospital from one house. Two girls, 10 and 14 years old, and their 51-year-old grandmother were killed in the second house. Nearly six months later, in March 1993, five people were killed and 17 others badly injured in a second racist attack on a two-family house in Sollingen. Three girls, aged 4, 9, 12, and two young woman of 18 and 27 were killed, three of the victims belonging to one family.

The district in which the town of Backnang is situated is regarded as a “stronghold” of the neo-Nazis in the Stuttgart urban area. In August 2000, a refugee camp was set on fire in nearby Waiblingen. Two months later, skinheads attacked a Greek businessman in Schorndorf. After a series of other attacks, police admitted there were about 70 known neo-fascists active in the district. In April 2010, a group of 70 neo-Nazis in Winterbach attempted to attack nine young people of Turkish and Italian origins. When the latter fled to a wooden hut, their attackers set the hut on fire, burning it to the ground.

In Backnang itself, Green Party member Daniel Muratidis wrote in his blog in March 2006: “The problem of the extreme right has worsened considerably in the past few years. For the past two, three years we have experienced right-wing daubings and car windscreens shattered by those the right-wingers regard as targets. The police reported 20 cases of neo-Nazi slogans written on walls in public places in March 2011. Many initiative groups organised anti-Nazi demonstrations in March 2012.

There are very good reasons to suspect that the fire in the house in Backnang was caused by extreme rightists while the police seek to cover up for those responsible. This was precisely the *modus operandi* of the intelligence services in the case of the terrorist attacks

conducted by the extreme-right National Socialist Underground (NSU) between 2000 and 2006, which would not have been possible without the covert support of the German intelligence agencies. The group of Nazi terrorists murdered eight Turkish and one Greek small businessmen and a policewoman. The role of diverse intelligence and police agencies in supporting the terrorists first came to light in January 2011. Federal and state governments also covered up the facts of the terrorist attacks.

If the fire was caused through a technical defect as the authorities claim, then the negligent German institutions are responsible for the deaths of the mother and children. The authorities ignored the repeated requests of the mother, refusing to give her adequate accommodation. Millions of workers, irrespective of their ethnic origins, are unable to pay exorbitant rents and live in similar housing conditions. Federal and state governments have abandoned the construction of affordable housing for low-wage workers, welfare recipients and their families. Instead, available housing complexes are sold off to investment funds for speculative profit, resulting in the explosion of rents.



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