

Germany: 60,000 people evacuated as WWII bomb is defused in Frankfurt

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The defusing of a World War II bomb on Sunday led to the largest evacuation in Germany so far in peacetime. More than 60,000 people had to leave their usual environment in Frankfurt for more than twelve hours. For many older people, this awakened memories of the Second World War.

A huge bomb had been discovered during construction work close to the new Goethe University. Before it could be defused, a 1.5-kilometre-radius area had to be completely evacuated. Two hospitals, several retirement homes, the new West End university campus, the broadcasting centre of Hessischer Rundfunk, the Deutsche Bundesbank headquarters and several large residential neighbourhoods are all located in this area. Had the bomb exploded, the entire evacuation zone could have been seriously damaged—72 years after the end of World War II.

The two-meter-long HC-400 bomb contained 1.4 tons of TNT. This would have been sufficient to destroy all buildings within a radius of over one hundred meters. Within a further kilometre and a half, all windows would have been shattered, and the shards might have caused enormous damage.

To render the bomb harmless, the bomb squad had to remove three rusted detonators. There were complications with two of the detonators, but at seven o'clock in the evening, about twelve hours after the evacuation had begun, the all-clear was given.

The authorities and police used the evacuation to conduct a comprehensive coordinated exercise in controlling an urban area. For six hours, hundreds of police officers combed through every street, house, and apartment searching for those who had stayed behind, while helicopters circled overhead, surveying the scene. Officers from Kassel and the rest of northern Hesse supported the Frankfurt police force.

In the meantime, hundreds of Frankfurt residents responded by spontaneously providing help to those affected. They shared information on the Internet about private rooms for those stranded, or volunteered to assist in the evacuation. Many pensioners had been hauled out of their beds at four o'clock in the morning and were taken out of the city at half past six. More than 1,100 volunteers helped staff to transport seniors and patients, among them many wheelchair users or the bedridden, as well as mothers with new-born infants.

For many older residents, the evacuation awoke memories of the last days of the Second World War. Lively discussions arose in places where the evacuees spent the day. In halls at the Frankfurt Messe and in the Höchst Jahrhunderthalle, but also throughout the entire city area, the subject of war was ever-present.

Many drew parallels to the current preparations for war. “We can now see very well what suffering a war can cause,” a youth told a group that met Socialist Equality Party supporters in the city.

“Now is the right time to change something,” said Florian, who works as a driver. “The war is mainly a big money-making business for the upper class. Only a tiny percentage of people profit from war.”

He was very interested when he learned about the Socialist Equality Party election campaign. He had never heard of a party expressly opposing war. He added, “War is not only conducted through arms, but also through financial means. It can also take on other forms, where whole populations are impoverished and the infrastructure is destroyed, as in Greece.”

Dieter, a retiree, cycled to the Jahrhunderthalle after watching the events on TV. “The memories are inevitably strong,” he said. He was seven years old at the end of the war. “My main memory of that time is the bomber squadrons. I can still hear the deep hum in

my ears as they came nearer and nearer. You never forget that.”

Dieter's family lived in Emmendingen (Baden-Wuerttemberg) at that time, where a factory made silk for parachutes. “That was a valuable target for the bombers,” he said. “We lived close by, but when the bombers came, we were up on a hill, and from there we saw the city being bombed.”

Then he described his worst memory: the company management had locked the doors “to prevent workers running away. And as we came back, we saw that people were hanging on the window bars, and they were dead. They had tried to escape, and had been caught by the second wave of bombers. That was the worst.”

In the Jahrhunderthalle, about 500 people, mainly seniors from retirement homes, wheelchair users and patients were waiting for the bomb to be defused. There were also several interesting conversations here.

Uwe had accompanied his acquaintance in a wheelchair. He said he found all the possible destruction “absolutely terrible ... what a war like that can cause decades later.” He quickly added, “What happened in Germany then, the Germans had done to other countries, like the bombing of Coventry, Warsaw, and other cities.”

Erika, an almost 90-year-old woman from Frankfurt-Bonames, said, “I am very moved by this. It recalls a time I am reluctant to remember.” She told about how she had experienced the bombing. “For a time, we had to get up every night, mother and four children, and we were looking for shelter under the railroad lines that led to Friedberg. Soldiers had built a dugout there. The bunkers were all full.”

Then she told of an experience she had as a student on the way home from Preungesheim to Bonames. “Suddenly, someone grabbed me from behind and pulled me into the ditch that zigzagged along the road. It was a soldier who saved me from the low-flying aircraft. Otherwise I would have been shot.”

Asked what she thought about the present situation, Erika said, “What we had been through, I don't wish that on young people today. At the end of the war, everything was destroyed. We were hungry and I was not allowed to train for a real job because we had so many small siblings.”

Finally, we met Dr. Beatrix Heintze, who is currently

confined to a wheelchair because of an ankle fracture. She confirmed that many elderly people had been strongly reminded of the bombings in the war, which she had also witnessed.

“I myself experienced this from a distance, but very intensively,” she said, “because my own grandfather was in the opposition to Hitler.” As it turned out, her grandfather was Walter Cramer, a friend of Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, one of the leaders of the July 20, 1944 resistance plot against Hitler. Like him, Cramer was also executed in Berlin-Plötzensee.

Dr. Heintze has written several books about him. “At that time, Cramer was chairman of a textile factory, the Stöhr & Co. worsted yarn spinners in Leipzig, and he was one of the few in business who actively campaigned for the Jews.” After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, she gained access to sources in the former East Germany. And, as she reported, her publications contributed to the erecting of a monument to Cramer in Leipzig.

Her father had also been in the opposition to Hitler, she continued. “This whole history strongly influenced me,” she said. All these things were now alive again.

We told Dr. Heintze that professors such as Jörg Baberowski at Humboldt University now officially declared that “Hitler was not vicious,” and that newsweekly *Der Spiegel* spreads such views uncritically. She was quite horrified. “I have not heard of that before,” she said. “But that really cannot be said now. Hitler might not have carried out any cruelty personally, but his whole policy was inhuman and cruel.”

She said, “I am worried about the tone that has entered politics with the election of Trump in America or with the [far right] Alternative for Germany here.”



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