

Germany: Twenty-five years since the arson attack in Solingen

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30 May 2018

Twenty-five years ago, on Saturday, May 29, 1993, five members of the Genç family were killed in an arson attack carried out by far-right extremists in the town of Solingen, North Rhine-Westphalia. A memorial march took place on Saturday to the site of the arson attack, which is now covered by five chestnut trees. The trees were planted to remember the family of five who died horribly in the flames.

According to the court that investigated the fire, the arson attack in Solingen was “one of the most serious xenophobic crimes in post-war history.” The five young women and girls who died in the flames were Gürsün Ince, Hatice Genç, Gülüstan Öztürk, and Hülya and Saime Genç. In addition, 14 other family members suffered serious injuries, which continue to plague them today.

Four youths and young men with links to the far-right were convicted for the offence, but the real figures behind the attack remained untouched. They wear suits instead of heavy boots and sat in government and the parliamentary parties.

Only three days before the attack in Solingen, the German Bundestag (parliament) in Bonn had decided to change the constitution and overturned the existing asylum law. On May 26, 1993, the Bundestag amended the previous Article 16 (“Right of Asylum”) of the country’s Basic Law with Article 16a, a far more complicated law that has been whittled down ever since.

In order to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority for a constitutional amendment, the CDU/FDP (Christian Democratic Union/Free Democrats) coalition under Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) needed the votes of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Outside the parliament in Bonn, 10,000 people demonstrated against the proposed changes. Inside, the Social Democrats ensured that the bill was passed. It was the first time in the history of the federal republic that a constitutional right had been altered.

The events of that time are terrifyingly relevant for the situation today. Twenty-five years after Solingen, the grand coalition of CDU/CSU (Christian Social Union) and SPD is once again whipping up the vilest form of racism and xenophobia under conditions that are much worse.

Following the reunification of Germany in 1991, a fierce offensive commenced against the working class. Instead of the promised “flourishing landscapes” in the east of the country, one factory after another was closed down and hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost. The potash industry in the east was shut down completely, leading to weeks of hunger strikes in Bischofferode, while in the west, steel plants like Krupp-Rheinhausen were closed, leaving tens of thousands of steelworkers and miners without work. To counter growing militancy and opposition, the government launched its xenophobic campaign in order to mobilise the dregs of society.

The attack in Solingen had been preceded by several arson attacks, mainly against asylum seekers: in September 1991 in Hoyerswerda, in August 1992 in Rostock-Lichtenhagen and in October 1992 in Lübeck. With the attack in Mölln, Schleswig-Holstein, on November 23, 1992, terror was directed for the first time not against refugees, but rather against a Turkish family living in Germany for decades. The Arslan family lost three relatives, including two little girls.

The far-right terror attacks, and especially the attack in Mölln, provoked a profound response in the population, with thousands taking to the streets. For their part, leading politicians reacted in two ways: Firstly, politicians, including Chancellor Helmut Kohl, joined candlelight processions and feigned their indignation. The government and judiciary also banned some fascist organisations. At the same time, they initiated a campaign against alleged asylum abuse and prepared to undermine the constitutional right of asylum law.

The new asylum law passed by the Bundestag was a clear signal to the far right and led to an unprecedented wave of racist murders and arson attacks. Within a few days of the law being passed, racist attacks took place in Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Constance, Hattingen, Soest and Bergisch-Glatzbach, and other towns. Neo-Nazis set fire to the flats and shops of Turkish families. Five years later, the far-right terror gang, the National Socialist Underground (NSU), began its campaign of murder under the watchful

eye of the German intelligence agencies.

Shortly after the killings in Solingen on June 11, 1993, the *Neue Arbeiterpresse*, the newspaper of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei's predecessor, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA), warned: "The first wave of racist violence was directed against refugees and asylum seekers. It ended with the government and opposition elevating the slogan 'Germany for the Germans' to official policy. ... The second wave is directed against foreign workers—and this also already finds an echo on the part of the government and the SPD. The third wave will be directed against German workers themselves. It is high time they woke up and took up the defence of foreign workers."

Today, the significance of these words is clear. The social crisis is much more advanced than it was 25 years ago. Millions of people live in poverty, work for low pay and, despite working full-time, are dependent on Hartz IV social assistance. At the other pole of society, 36 individuals in Germany possess as much wealth as the entire poorer half of the population.

Following the financial crisis of 2008, the German government responded to growing international tensions by reviving great power politics and militarism. It is currently investing tens of billions of euros into rearmament, squeezing out the money required via social attacks on the working population. In order to combat the inevitable resistance, it is mobilising an unprecedented surveillance apparatus.

To this end, it is also resurrecting its anti-refugee rhetoric of the early 1990s to counter the opposition to social inequality, state rearmament, militarism and its attacks on basic democratic rights. The ruling grand coalition is doubling the rate of deportations, establishing "safe countries of origin" to send them back to, and interning refugees in so-called anchor camps. Events such as New Year's Eve in Cologne, the harmless protest by refugees in Ellwangen and alleged "abuses" at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bamf) are distorted and exaggerated by the media to stir up sentiment against refugees and all those who defend them.

The established political parties play into the hands of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). This far-right party is growing and thriving on the basis of such campaigns and now has 94 deputies in the Bundestag. Many of these deputies were previously active in other parties, in the German army or in the state apparatus. Almost every day, the AfD appears to spread their filth on primetime television.

In order to justify the dismantling of basic democratic rights, politicians and journalists use the same arguments as previously, merely replacing the phrase "asylum flood" with "wave of refugees."

Twenty-five years ago, the SPD deputy Hans-Ulrich Klose justified his agreement to the change in asylum law in the Bundestag by citing the "very concrete fear" that immigration endangered "the stability of our democracy." Today, Justice Minister Katerina Barley (SPD) claims that in order to "restore confidence," it is necessary to randomly review all asylum decisions nationwide—a measure that requires every recognised refugee to live in constant fear.

In order to be able to deport refugees more quickly, SPD party and faction leader Andrea Nahles supports the demand of the conservative Union parties to declare the Maghreb states safe countries of origin. "Yes, we agreed that together," she proudly told the *Passauer Neue Presse*. For Nahles that was all part of "a welcoming culture," because "we cannot take them all in."

Politicians from the Greens and the Left Party argue in the same vein. They only express reservations against an investigation into Bamf by the Bundestag, because such a move "would take too long." "Instead we need solutions here and now," Katrin Göring-Eckart (the Greens) and Sahra Wagenknecht (Left Party) declared in almost identical manner.

The incitement and the terror directed against refugees evokes disgust and horror among broad layers of working people and youth. On Sunday, 70,000 people took to the streets of Berlin to protest against a demonstration by the AfD, which was only able to mobilise 3,000 supporters. But this opposition requires a political perspective.

At the beginning of December 1992, just two weeks after Mölln's arson attack, the BSA held an international conference against racism and the threat of war in Frankfurt. In its resolution, the conference warned against relying on the state in the struggle against fascist terror and called on the international working class "to join forces across borders, regardless of colour, language and nationality." The resolution continued: "Only the independent mobilisation of the working class against capitalism can prevent the threat of fascism." This has been dramatically confirmed since.



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