

# What lies behind the fatal attack at Frankfurt Central Rail Station?

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The fatal attack at Frankfurt's main railway station on July 29, in which an eight-year-old boy was killed and his mother injured, has provoked horror in Germany and around the world.

Habte A. allegedly pushed a forty-year-old woman and her eight-year-old son onto the tracks in front of an arriving Intercity Express train (ICE). The mother was able to save herself but could not manage to get her son off the tracks as well. The boy, who was on vacation with his mother, died on the spot.

The alleged perpetrator had also tried to push a seventy-eight-year-old woman onto the tracks. However, she was able to defend herself against her assailant and fell onto the platform. She received a shoulder injury and suffered from shock.

The forty-year-old perpetrator tried to escape but was eventually caught and held by members of the public, including a police officer, until the police arrested him.

Senior State Attorney Nadja Niesen said that the perpetrator, who has been living in Switzerland since 2006 and was born in Eritrea, probably chose his victims arbitrarily. There was no known relationship between the victims and the suspect, she said.

Contrary to the initial speculation in some media reports, the crime was apparently not an act of revenge for the right-wing terrorist attack in Wächtersbach on July 22, in which an Eritrean man was shot from a moving car. Nor did the perpetrator appear to be a religious extremist. He was not considered to be particularly religious by those who know him.

At present, investigators believe that Habte A. suffers from a mental disorder, possibly a form of paranoia. As the Swiss *Tages-Anzeiger* writes, documents found during a search of his apartment suggest such an illness. Investigations are under way to determine whether mental illness prevents Habte A. from being held criminally liable.

Although at the time of the attack, little was known about the alleged perpetrator other than his name, age and Eritrean heritage, a hate campaign was quickly launched against refugees in general and Eritreans in particular. The parliamentary leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Alice Weidel, tweeted, "Protect the citizens of our country—instead of the limitless culture of welcome!" The party's Bundestag (parliamentary) faction said something similar: "How many citizens are to be sacrificed on the altar of this limitless culture of welcome?"

The *Bild* newspaper immediately published the full name of the alleged perpetrator and initiated a foul campaign against immigration and for strengthening the German and European borders. Editor-in-Chief Julian Reichelt set the tone in a sarcastic comment on Tuesday.

"No, that is certainly no reason to halt political debate about the origins of the perpetrator," Reichelt wrote in an attack on those still

looking for the motive for the crime. "Because the question is not just how a person can do such a thing. The question is also why exactly this person and many other potential or already active violent criminals can enter Germany completely unhindered... [Why] there is no systematic control over who comes to Germany or moves freely among us."

The right wing in Switzerland reacted similarly. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) in the canton of Zurich stated in a press release that it has "always criticised lax asylum policies towards Eritreans." It continued: "This heinous crime shows once again that such persons are violent offenders who cannot be integrated..." The Swiss tabloid *Blick* called the culprit the "rail track killer."

Representatives of Germany's grand coalition government, consisting of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), formally distanced themselves from overtly racist comments. At the same time, however, they used the incident to raise demands for securing German and European external borders and increasing the police powers of the state.

Federal Interior Minister Horst Seehofer broke off his vacation to travel to Berlin and meet with the heads of the German security authorities. On the day after the crime, he held a press conference with the heads of the Federal Police and the BKA (Federal Criminal Police, similar to the FBI), calling for an increase in the number of Federal Police, stepped up video surveillance in public areas and a tightening of the country's borders by means of dragnets and temporary controls.

SPD politician Martin Burkert demanded that the railway company reinforce the surveillance of platforms. "Better surveillance would help," he told the *Bild*. "In addition, federal police officers were missing."

While bourgeois politicians and the popular press have exploited the horrific incident to incite racism and demand the expansion of state powers, reports from those who know Habte A. provide a more accurate picture of the man. Although the motive has not yet been established and Habte A. has remained silent under questioning, many things point to a serious mental disorder. It is not unlikely that given the Eritrean's history as a refugee, traumatic experiences endured by him and millions of other refugees around the world may have played a role.

Habte A. is a married father of three young preschool children. He lived with his family in Wädenswil on Lake Zurich and reportedly speaks very good German.

In 2006, he came to Switzerland from Eritrea as a refugee and applied for asylum there. It took two years for his asylum application to be approved. He then had to wait another three years until he

received a residency permit, which enabled him to stay permanently in Switzerland and seek work.

According to media reports, Habte A. worked as a building fitter in Aarau for six years. When he lost his job in 2017 due to a decline in orders, he took part in an integration programme of the Swiss Workers' Relief Organization (SAH). He was so well integrated into Swiss society that his story was mentioned in a booklet about the programme. He then found employment in the body shop of the Verkehrsbetriebe Zürich (VBZ).

Otherwise, Habte A. apparently lived an inconspicuous life. Apart from a "minor traffic offence," the Zurich cantonal police said he had never come to their notice. Those acquainted with him say he had never been known to be aggressive.

However, since the summer of 2018, people around him noticed changes and psychological peculiarities. A friend interviewed by *Focus* magazine said he apparently suffered from paranoia and heard voices. "When we sat alone somewhere, he would suddenly turn and say, 'Who's talking about me?'"

Habte A. increasingly felt persecuted and thought he was being affected by cell phone radiation and electromagnetic waves. He feared that train passengers and colleagues could read his mind and manipulate him and possibly even destroy his life.

According to a report by the *Tages-Anzeiger*, in January 2019, he was diagnosed for the first time with paranoia, given sick leave and referred to a psychiatrist. After this, he no longer held down a job.

On the Thursday before the crime in Frankfurt, he was said to have become aggressive and violent towards those close to him for the first time. He threatened a neighbour with a knife. Subsequently, he locked his wife, their three small children and the neighbour in his apartment, where they were later released by police officers. According to media reports, the two women were shocked because they had never experienced him like this before.

Afterwards, Habte A. went missing and the Swiss police launched a nationwide search. He later admitted to the police in Frankfurt that he had taken the ICE from Basel to Frankfurt. Why he travelled there is unclear. Whether he chose Frankfurt because, next to Zurich, it has one of the largest Eritrean communities in Europe remains unclear.

The results of the medical examinations Habte A. is currently undergoing have not been revealed. However, it is hardly conceivable that there is no connection between his experiences as a refugee from Eritrea and his violent and brutal behaviour in Frankfurt and sudden aggression against his wife and children in Switzerland.

Even a cursory glance at the humanitarian situation in Eritrea and the situation of refugees from the small East African state reveals the extreme strain on people living there as well as those seeking to flee to Europe.

The country is often referred to as the "North Korea of Africa" because it is so isolated and the state largely controls the life of the population. There is a so-called National Service, which includes military conscription and labour service, which begins in the last year of school. The length of this service is unlimited, according to reports by Amnesty International. This is one of the main reasons why young Eritreans are fleeing the country. Out of a population of only 3.2 million, 500,000 Eritreans are seeking refuge worldwide.

Ever since 2006, when escaping military conscription was recognised as a valid reason for asylum in Switzerland, thousands of Eritreans have fled there, according to a *Focus* report. At that time, the so-called National Service had just been extended from 18 months to an indefinite period. Habte A. came to Switzerland during this time.

Even the right-wing EU governments that are seeking to deny refugees the right to asylum by any and all means cannot help but acknowledge that the situation in Eritrea is catastrophic. After refugees coming from the civil war countries of Yemen and Syria, those from Eritrea have the highest rate of asylum recognition within the EU (85 percent), according to the 2018 Annual Report of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO).

But those fleeing Eritrea face traumatic experiences not only in their homeland, but also on the way to Europe. As Amnesty International writes, on the long escape route they run the risk of being "arbitrarily detained, abducted, sexually abused and mistreated." Thousands of Eritreans are stuck in Libyan torture camps. There are no figures about how many have drowned in the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe.

Fana Asefaw, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, told the *Luzerner Zeitung* that she finds many of those who have fled Eritrea to Switzerland to be "lost and disoriented." They would come "often with a high vulnerability, damaged by the time in their homeland, but also by the bad experiences from their flight."

She said that their situation in Switzerland was often responsible for trauma and aggression disorders, for which she treats many of her patients. About half of the refugees from Eritrea were, in her view, affected by post-migratory stress.

And even those who eventually make it to Switzerland are far from secure there. The radical right-wing SVP and the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) have conducted a targeted racist campaign in recent years to ensure that people from Eritrea, in particular, live in constant fear.

In an article from March of this year, the Swiss *Wochenzeitung* described the persecution as follows: "The SEM [State Secretariat for Migration] has been tightening up its procedures for Eritrean asylum seekers for years. First, the illegal exit from Eritrea was no longer accepted as a reason for flight, then it was decided that return was unreasonable only in exceptional cases, and lastly that even impending forced recruitment into the notorious National Service upon return did not constitute a threat. The Federal Administrative Court subsequently blessed these restrictive measures with three constitutional judgements."

In addition, the newspaper noted, since April 2018 the files of 3,000 Eritrean refugees had been investigated with the aim of removing their right of residence.

To what extent did the incessant racist campaign against Eritreans in Switzerland contribute to the paranoia, panic and finally uncontrollable aggression that killed an eight-year-old boy on July 29? These questions have hardly been addressed in the media coverage of the deadly attack in Frankfurt.

All this does not excuse the terrible act. But it sheds a glaring light on the conditions under which millions of refugees worldwide are living, and on the long shadows cast for years to come by war and flight in an atmosphere of state-sponsored fear and the witch-hunting of refugees.



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