

Following terrorist attack in Germany, Jewish community strongly criticises police intervention in Halle

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Following the right-wing terrorist attack on a Jewish synagogue in Halle in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt, Holger Stahlknecht, Saxony-Anhalt's Interior Minister, has rejected all of the criticisms of the police and state authorities made by the Jewish community.

At a meeting of the interior affairs committee in the state parliament on Monday, he issued a stamp of approval to the police operation, while acknowledging that law enforcement officers took some time to detain the right-wing extremist Stephan Balliet. Firstly, Balliet attempted to force his way into the synagogue with firearms for several minutes without anything being done to stop him. Then, prior to the arrival of the police, he shot two bystanders. He was injured in a subsequent exchange of fire with the police, but was able to flee in a car with flat tires. The heavily-armed police special forces unit claimed that they "lost sight" of the fleeing gunman for an hour.

Immediately after the attack, both the Central Jewish Council in Germany and the local Jewish community in Halle made serious accusations against the police. Josef Schuster, chairman of the Central Council, complained on the evening of the attack that it was "scandalous" for a synagogue not to be protected by the police on a holiday like Yom Kippur.

Max Privorozki, head of the Jewish community in Halle, stated in an interview, with the images of the attempted massacre still fresh in his mind, "Instead of helping us, the police are always doing something else." The police also arrived too late on the scene, he added. They took 10 minutes after Privorozki informed them about the armed attack on the synagogue. When he requested police protection for synagogues in Saxony-Anhalt, Privorozki said he was told,

"Everything is wonderful, everything is great, it's fine."

On Friday, Stahlknecht described these statements as "false claims about facts." The security authorities had nothing to be ashamed of, he continued. At the special session of the interior affairs committee on Monday, he released a minute-by-minute record of the police intervention. The lengthy, detailed report was aimed at justifying the police's activities and silencing their critics.

The real questions were neither posed nor answered by the committee.

Why was the synagogue in Halle not protected on the most important Jewish holiday, although this is standard practice for Jewish institutions in other cities, and the Jewish community in Halle had requested more protection?

The newspaper *Jüdische Allgemeine* cited an eyewitness of the attack, who remarked, "The community has repeatedly told the police that they require better protection. The answer was always the same: 'No acute threat exists.' In addition, our security guard is not a trained security guard, but a member of the community who declared he would protect the synagogue to the best of his abilities as an amateur.

"We were incredibly afraid ... The door is made from wood and not especially well protected, like the doors in Berlin and Munich. In addition, we were unarmed. It's a miracle that we survived. It was a very, very close-run thing. Normal glass is in the windows, the gunman would have only needed to fire through one and he would have been inside and could have carried out a bloodbath. Additionally, the gunman attached Molotov cocktails and, I believe, grenades to the door.

It was only a matter of luck that they didn't go off and cause the synagogue to catch fire."

Stahlknecht claimed the security forces responded promptly and professionally. A "major operation" for the police was immediately called. Up to 740 officers were involved in the operation and pursuing the attacker. He confirmed that the police fired on the 27-year-old neo-Nazi with an MP5 machine gun pistol, injuring him on the throat. However, it is unclear whether the car was damaged during the exchange of fire or beforehand.

The fact remains that the injured attacker was able to escape in a car with flat tires even though the police units were armed and had blocked the road. Only after the police were notified that he had shot and seriously injured two people 15 kilometres away in Wiedersdorf and seized a taxi did they renew their pursuit.

But they lost him again, until he was identified by a police car 15 minutes later after he rammed another vehicle. Shortly thereafter, he collided head-on with a lorry in a single-lane building site. Only then was Balliet arrested by two officers from the small town of Zeitz.

Nobody on the committee asked the question, who was the operational commander who was responsible for protecting the synagogue and the botched police pursuit? Who were the police officers who stopped the neo-Nazi in front of the kebab shop in Halle before letting him drive on? Are any of these police officers members of the AfD or active in far-right circles?

The fact that the AfD has many members and officials among the police is well known.

One only needs to look at the AfD's candidate list for the upcoming state elections in the neighbouring state of Thuringia to confirm this. Five police officers are among the party's candidates, according to a report from *Junge Welt*, which listed their names: Torsten Czuppon (Sömmerda), Ringo Mühlmann (Erfurt), Sebastian Thielier (Elxleben), Ingo Zickler (Erfurt) and René Strube (Niedergebra). The AfD list is led by Björn Höcke, a tenured teacher. The five police officers have refused to distance themselves from Höcke's far-right faction of the AfD.

Interior Minister Stahlknecht's defence of the police and his declaration that "No ifs or buts, the police deserve our strongest gratitude," say nothing about the real role of the police. These comments reveal much

more about the right-wing policies of the state government, in which the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, and Greens collaborate closely in a coalition.

The daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* praised Stahlknecht and his defence of the police. The paper wrote, "This assessment is shared by all parties in Magdeburg." Green Party politician Sebastian Striegel stated it was merely necessary to talk about improving details, such as how to handle a large number of emergency calls. SPD politician Rüdiger Erben commented following the interior affairs committee meeting that in summary, one could say that the police got most things right and did very little wrong.

The FAZ reported that "even the opposition Left Party interior affairs politician Henriette Quade" came to the conclusion that the police acted "relatively promptly" and that one could accuse them of "no fundamental errors."



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