

Right-wing extremist sentenced to life imprisonment for attack on synagogue in Halle, Germany

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The Naumburg Regional High Court sentenced the Halle assailant to lifelong imprisonment with additional preventive detention on two convictions of murder, multiple attempted murders, sedition, and other crimes. The court followed recommendations made by the state prosecutor and co-plaintiff.

Stephan Balliet, who was 27 years old at the time, attempted to kill more than 50 people in a synagogue in Halle, Germany, on October 9, 2019, the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. After failing to break down the reinforced door, he shot and killed a random passerby and a man in a nearby kebab shop, and injured several others.

Balliet must now serve at least 20 years in prison. Subsequently, his custody can be reviewed every two years. This is the strongest punishment available under German law. However, the ruling can still be appealed to the Federal High Court.

There was never any doubt about Balliet's responsibility for the crime. He filmed his attack, which was modelled on the Christchurch terrorist attack on two mosques, and livestreamed it online. During the five-month trial, he openly confessed his guilt and sought to use the courtroom as a stage for the propagation of his anti-Semitic, racist, and genocidal ideas. Although a forensic psychiatrist diagnosed him with a complex personality disorder, they deemed him mentally fit to stand trial.

Due to reasons of space and security, the trial was not held at the regional high court, but in the city of Magdeburg. Together with 45 survivors and relatives of the dead, who joined the co-plaintiff's case and were represented by 21 lawyers, 280 journalists from all over the world followed the trial. The court questioned 86 witnesses and six experts.

Presiding judge Ursula Mertens granted considerable

time to the co-plaintiffs, who experienced the attack on the synagogue in fear of their lives, to detail their personal experiences and the psychological impact of the events—a rarity in a German court. As a result, she received substantial praise from those affected, the media, and politicians.

For example, Jewish victims reported on cases of post-traumatic stress disorder and how they are considering leaving Germany as quickly as possible. A woman recalled the fate of her grandfather, who survived the Holocaust as the only one in his family, but lost over 100 relatives. Now, she said, she has “joined the ranks of the survivors.”

The political background to the attack and Balliet's ties to right-wing extremist terrorist groups went largely unmentioned in the trial. The former chemistry student was presented as a loner who lived alone with his mother, had no job and no girlfriend, and quenched his thirst for far-right ideology online.

However, when the court heard testimony from officers from the Federal Bureau of Criminal Police (BKA) who evaluated Balliet's computer and data storage devices, it quickly became clear that the police never seriously attempted to link Balliet to right-wing extremist groups.

The BKA found over 3,000 racist and anti-Semitic videos downloaded by Balliet from imageboards and chatrooms. For his part, he uploaded a “manifesto” and instructions on how to build weapons, and made contact with the right-wing extremist milieu on imageboards and gaming platforms like Steam.

But although the BKA was able in part to identify the platforms on which Balliet was active, and received data from his accounts on Steam, it undertook no further research and failed to secure important communication protocols. A BKA expert who wrote the note on Steam

was forced to admit following a question from one of the co-plaintiff's lawyers that she had no idea what the game was about. As a result, important details about potential accomplices were lost.

Co-plaintiff lawyer Kristin Pietrzyk complained that the substandard investigation denied "us the opportunity to learn how these structures work and how these attacks develop." Her colleague, Onur Özata, commented, "Here we were able to confirm a major gap in knowledge." The lawyer David Benjamin Herrmann described the BKA as "a hobbling patient far behind the times."

The BKA's lack of interest in the investigation fits into a definite pattern. Right-wing extremist terrorist networks, like "Hannibal," "NSU 2.0," "Northern Cross," and others, have close ties to the military and police, and are systematically trivialised and covered up. The numerous links between the National Socialist Underground (NSU), which carried out at least 10 racist murders, and the intelligence agencies remain concealed to this day.

Moreover, Halle is not an isolated event. In the state of Saxony-Anhalt alone, there were 133 incidents of right-wing violence during 2019, as co-plaintiff lawyer Sebastian Scharmer noted in his concluding arguments. The investigating authorities simply failed to learn anything about those who had knowledge of the attack or were even co-conspirators, which is why the judiciary embraced the narrative of a "lone wolf," he said.

Then just four months after the Halle attack, another right-wing extremist, Tobias Rathjen, murdered 10 people in Hanau, Hesse, for racist reasons. He was also allegedly a "lone wolf" who was radicalised online.

The regularity of such attacks is possible only within a political climate in which right-wing extremist ideology and tendencies are systematically supported and encouraged from the highest positions.

This was shown by the fact that in Saxony-Anhalt, the synagogue targeted by Balliet had no security in place on the most important Jewish holiday, even though concrete threats had been made. And when the police were forced to guard Jewish institutions after the attack, then-Interior Minister Holger Stahlknecht complained to police that they could no longer cope with their more important tasks.

At the national level, right-wing extremist tendencies are being deliberately promoted and supported. In spite of its trivialisation of the Nazis, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is celebrated and elected into leading parliamentary committee positions. Numerous police officers, military officers, professors, and even judges are themselves active

in the right-wing extremist party. The intelligence service advises and protects them.

As far as the ruling class is concerned, the threat is always on the left. Anti-fascist organisations, like the Association of the Persecuted by the Nazi Regime (VVN-BdA), had its charitable status withdrawn in order to drive it into financial bankruptcy. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is under surveillance by the intelligence service because it, according to the official justification, "advocates for a democratic, egalitarian and socialist society," and agitates "against alleged 'imperialism' and 'militarism.'"

The SGP was added to the official intelligence agency's report, the Verfassungsschutz Report, after it criticised the right-wing extremist historian Jörg Baberowski and won widespread support among students and workers as a result. The academic and political establishment closed ranks in defence of Baberowski against the SGP, even though he had said of Hitler that he was "not vicious" and supported the line of the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte.

The return of the ruling elite to its fascist traditions, which were only covered over by an emergency band-aid after 1945, is the product of the intensification of the class struggle. The growing gulf between rich and poor, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs in industry and air travel, the criminal coronavirus policy, which puts profits before lives, and the revival of militarism are triggering mass resistance. As in the early 1930s, the ruling class is responding by supporting fascist tendencies.

Stephan Balliet deserves his sentence. But his conviction will not stop the shift to the right and the strengthening of anti-Semitic forces bound up with this. That can only be done by an independent political movement of the working class fighting for a socialist society.



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