

Germany: The far-right murders of Hanau, two years on

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Last Saturday, the mass murders of February 19, 2020 were commemorated in the German city of Hanau. The case has never been completely clarified and raises questions that extend far beyond the crime itself.

The ceremony at the Hanau cemetery was broadcast live on Hesse television with a public commemoration in the neighbouring cities of Offenbach and Dietzenbach. In the afternoon and evening, the bereaved families, friends and supporters demonstrated through Hanau, gathering at the crime scenes at the times the murders took place.

In the late evening of February 19, 2020, nine people were shot dead in quick succession. The perpetrator, Tobias Rathjen (43), a racist known to the authorities, had posted a misanthropic confession on the internet shortly before the crime. Nevertheless, he succeeded in visiting one crime scene after the other, at each murdering complete strangers.

On Hanau's Haymarket, Rathjen first shot a young father named Kaloyan Velkov (33), who was hosting at the La Votré bar, before killing worker Fatih Saraçoğlu (34) in broad daylight and proceeding to murder the owner of the Midnight bar across the street, Sedat Gürbüz (29). From the Haymarket, Rathjen drove 3 kilometers to the neighborhood of Hanau-Kesselstadt, where he first shot young Vili Viorel Păun (22), a courier service driver who had followed Rathjen's car and had tried several times to reach the police. Rathjen got out, approached Vili's car and shot him through the windshield.

In Kesselstadt, Rathjen proceeded to shoot dead five more people: at a kiosk he shot the bricklayer Gökhan Gültekin (37) and Mercedes Kierpacz (35), a single mother who was there to get pizza for her two children. Ferhat Unvar (22), a young heating and gas technician, was shot behind the kiosk counter and bled to death from his wounds. In the adjacent Arena bar, the killer finally struck down Hamza Kurtović (22), a warehouse clerk, and shot Said Nesar Hashemi (21), a machine operator at Dunlop. Three others were seriously injured. Finally, the perpetrator drove home unmolested, where he shot his mother and then himself.

Even today, two years later, many questions remain unanswered: Why was the killer, a right-wing extremist known to the police, in possession of multiple firearms? How was it possible that he could continue his killing spree unopposed over such a long time period? Why was the emergency hotline unavailable? And why were the most important details ultimately determined by the bereaved families and not by the state authorities?

Tobias Rathjen had drawn attention to himself in the months before the crime by writing several letters to the attorney general and to the Hanau prosecutor's office. The letters contained paranoid fantasies, but also references to his website. There, on February 13, 2020, six days before the night of the killing spree, he posted a long document with fascist extermination fantasies and videos that should have raised immediate alarm. But nothing happened and the string of murders took its course.

In the months leading up to the crime, Rathjen had participated in multiple combat trainings in Slovakia as well as other firearms courses. Indeed, he was only one of many: According to the report from the Verfassungsschutz (Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the German intelligence agency), as of the end of 2020 there are at least 1,200 right-wing extremists known to the authorities to be legally in possession of firearms in Germany. In this regard, Serpil Unvar, the mother of the murdered Ferhat, said, "It is hard to imagine that no German intelligence noticed who was training for combat with firearms. The perpetrator trained a great deal to kill our children professionally."

Other tips should have alerted the authorities at an early stage. Since 2017, there had been two incidents in the immediate vicinity of the perpetrator's home: A man in full combat gear had insulted Hanau youths as "kanaks" (a racist slur for people of Middle Eastern origin), threatened them with an assault rifle and announced that there would be "dead bodies." The police, who were alerted, did not take any action, refrained from establishing the identity of the gunman, and instead threatened the bring charges against the young people.

The events of February 19 and thereafter were traumatic for the victims' families. After the murders, parents and relatives were not informed, they were not allowed to approach the crime scenes and they were not allowed to see their slain children. Instead, the police gathered them in a police hall in Hanau-Lamboy, where they had to wait until the next morning before they learned the identities of the slain.

Those desperate families suffered dismissive, indifferent treatment from the authorities. Piter Minnemann, a survivor of the Arena Bar massacre, approached a group of police standing near the scene of the shooting, "Come quickly, we've been shot at, people are dying in there!" As he reported, "They didn't listen to me at all."

When Mercedes Kierpacz did not come home, her family, wracked with anxiety, waited for hours outside the cordoned zone

in their car. Around two o'clock in the morning, they were rudely apprehended by several armed police officers. The patrol did not react to the father's insistence: "Listen, I am Mercedes' father." The policemen drew his weapon and at gunpoint ordered everyone to get out and put their hands on the car. Only when another officer intervened and said, "These are the relatives," did they let the family be, without apologizing, merely stating, "False alarm."

Vili Viorel Paun's parents also waited, filled with anxiety. It was not until the following noon that they went to the police, only to learn there that their son had been dead for hours. Not a word was said about Paun's futile attempts on the night of the crime to alert the police and stop the perpetrator. Only much later did the parents find this out themselves. Vili Viorel Paun had tried three times to reach the emergency number but could not get through and his emergency calls were not registered.

Immediately after the first murders at Haymarket, other witnesses informed the police about the murderer's license plate number. Nevertheless, it took five hours, until three in the morning, for the police to forcibly enter the perpetrator's house in Hanau-Kesselstadt.

The victims' bodies were taken to Frankfurt and autopsied there without the relatives being informed, let alone giving their consent. The reports stated untruthfully that the families had "not been reached." The bereaved families had no chance to see their slain loved ones before the postmortem. "We were deprived of the right to say goodbye with dignity," said one relative.

The many details combine to form a clear picture: Survivors and relatives had to deal with a police force whose conduct was biased, sloppy and at times racist. In the case of Vili Viorel Paun, the death certificate was in the name of his father, Nicolescu Paun. As Hamza's father, Armin Kurtovi?, reported, his son was described in the death certificate as "Oriental-Southern," although he was dirty-blond, blue-eyed and fair-skinned. "For eight days we didn't know where he was," Kurtovi? said.

After the murders, several survivors even received a "danger address," i.e., an official statement from the police that the authorities considered the addressees to be a possible source of danger.

Many rightly criticize the structural racism evident in Hanau. But it is more than that. The attack on the Hanau Nine was an attack on the working class. Hanau and especially Hanau-Kesselstadt are mainly inhabited by working class families originally from Kurdistan, Turkey, Bosnia, Bulgaria and Romania, whose children were born and raised in Germany. They work in construction or at Dunlop, at Opel, at the Rhine-Main Airport, or in the banking metropolis as care workers, in sanitation or in the supplier industry. Most of them know each other and meet after work, while shopping, at schools or sports. Rathjen's fatal shots were directed against this international, proletarian community.

And here lies the key to understanding the unanswered questions. To this day the entirety of official politics is directed against this social class. The interests of the ruling classes, their profit-before-lives policy in the pandemic, and especially their policies of crisis and war are not compatible with the needs of working people. As the WSWs has previously stated, "The very existence of an alert and potentially rebellious working class poses

a constant threat to the ruling politicians."

The established parties have systematically created a political climate that boosts the extreme-right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and encourages violent right-wing extremists. This is particularly evident in the German state of Hesse. Right-wing extremist networks reaching far into the state apparatus are protected at the highest levels and hidden from public view. When the National Socialist Underground (NSU) shot Halit Yozgat in April 2006 in the city of Kassel, an agent of the state Verfassungsschutz (State Office for the Protection of the Constitution), Andreas Temme, was personally present. An internal report on the NSU findings by the Hesse intelligence service has been sealed to the public for the next 30 years.

The 2019 murder of District President Walter Lübcke (Christian Democrats, CDU) in the city of Kassel is likewise far from resolved. Just like the Hanau murders, it is portrayed as the work of a "lone wolf" perpetrator, the fascist Stephan Ernst.

Hate mail from the organization NSU 2.0, threatening representatives of left-wing politics and culture currently being adjudicated at the regional court in Frankfurt, are being dealt with in a similar manner. The only person accused is 54-year-old Alexander M. from Berlin, also called a "lone wolf" perpetrator. Minister of the Interior Peter Beuth (CDU) claims: "Hessian police officers were at no time senders or participants in the NSU 2.0 threat mail series." This is a proven lie. Less than an hour before the lawyer Seda Ba?ay-Yildiz received the first threatening letter, there had been no less than 17 queries from three databases from a service computer in the 1st Police Station in Frankfurt.

In the case of the Hanau murders, Interior Minister Beuth also explicitly praised the "professional work" of the police on the night of the crime. However, in June 2021, the same interior minister had to disband the elite unit of the Frankfurt police (Specialeinsatzkommando, SEK) because at least 20 of its officers had frequented chats with right-wing extremist content, where they had shared Nazi symbols and agitated against civilians. Thirteen officers of this SEK unit were on duty and on the scene in Hanau on the night of the crime.



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