

Train accident near Garmisch-Partenkirchen: A fatal accident that could have been predicted

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A serious train accident occurred last Friday in the German state of Bavaria, on the regional line between Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Munich near Burgrain. Before the train reached the station in the village of Farchant, all five carriages and the locomotive derailed on the single track in a left-hand curve, for reasons that have not yet been explained.

Five people were killed in the accident. The victims include four women aged 30, 39, 51 and 70, and a boy aged 13. The more than 40 injured were admitted to hospitals in the area, some of them in Austria. Several of the victims were still in a critical condition at the beginning of the week. All those initially reported missing have since been found.

A total of about 140 passengers were on the train, which consisted of five double-decker carriages, including many schoolchildren who were on their way home at the start of the Whitsun holidays in Bavaria.

Pictures from the scene of the accident only hint at the terrible extent of the accident. Two wagons were torn off the track, fell down an embankment and remained smashed and wedged into each other. For a long time, it was unclear whether there were other victims among the overturned wagons.

“From the way the accident occurred, we knew that people had probably been thrown out in the middle wagon,” Stephen Jaklitsch of the Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW) told broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR). The remaining wagons and the locomotive came to a halt at a severe angle on the track bed.

In Bavaria, many people have lost their lives in serious train accidents in recent years. Between Bad Aibling and Kolbermoor, two Meridian trains collided head-on in 2016, killing 12. Near Aichach, there was a significant

collision between a regional train and a goods train in 2018. Two people, including the train driver, lost their lives. In February this year, two suburban trains collided head-on south of Munich; one person died in the accident.

The train police task force is currently investigating the circumstances of the accident. The Munich Public Prosecutor’s Office has also commissioned an external specialist to prepare an accident analysis report. It could take months until the cause of the accident is finally established.

However, most experts now assume that only a technical defect in the rails or the train’s chassis can be considered as the cause of the accident. Markus Hecht, a professor of rail vehicles at the Technical University of Berlin, told *Wirtschaftswoche*: “The only possible cause is actually a warped track.” Often, tracks only become deformed when a train is running over them. The cause could be a maintenance error on the track.

The suspicion that something was wrong with the tracks makes it even more urgent because Germany’s railway infrastructure is known to be in a catastrophic condition. Only five days before the accident, Deutsche Bahn CEO Richard Lutz declared that the railway network was completely dilapidated in many places and in urgent need of renovation; he spoke of a refurbishment backlog of 20 years.

Der Spiegel, which devoted its cover story to the topic the day before the accident, quoted a train driver with 33 years professional experience: “The fatal development began with the privatisation of the railways in 1994. Valuable railway lines had been dismantled, resources had become scarce, urgently needed renovations had been omitted.”

The DB-Netz, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Bahn AG rail company responsible for the rail infrastructure,

was repeatedly restructured and cut back during this time in the ultimately failed attempt to float the railways on the stock exchange at a profit.

The line between Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Munich was notorious for its many damaged spots, which forced the trains to slow down, with corresponding delays. According to a report in *Die Welt*, renovation work was planned soon on the accident route. Deutsche Bahn refuses to comment, referring to the ongoing investigations.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* quotes Norbert Moy of the passenger association Pro Bahn, who confirms that this had frequently angered passengers on the Garmisch line in recent years. “The repair squads are simply not as quick on the rail tracks,” he said. His association had already pleaded in 2007 for a return to more “preventive maintenance,” to “ensure trouble-free operations again.” Other transport associations have also been calling for years for more money to be put into rail infrastructure and its maintenance—without success.

Moy also told the *Münchener Merkur* that the double-decker coaches now involved in the accident had only been in use on the line between Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Munich since 2018. Previously, more modern class 442 “Talent” multiple units from the 2000s ran there, which were then transferred to the “ÜFEX” airport express between Regensburg and Munich Airport.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of technical defects, the Munich public prosecutor's office is investigating three Deutsche Bahn employees on suspicion of negligent homicide. This is said to be routine, and no one is named, with the presumption of innocence being stressed. But it would not be the first time that a train driver or railway employee was used as a scapegoat for the failure of the railway companies.

While there is no money for the safety of the railways and its passengers, there is no lack of it when it comes to lucrative prestige projects. It borders on irony that only a few days before the accident and only a few kilometres away from the accident site, the Oberau tunnel was opened, extending the motorway over four lanes from Munich to the entrance of the ski and holiday resort of Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

The cost of the entire project: €204 million. The money had been channelled into his constituency in the region by the previous federal Transport Minister Alexander Dobrindt (Christian Social Union, CSU).

The disaster was immediately followed by the usual crocodile tears and hollow expressions of sympathy from

the ruling class. They spoke of their “thoughts and prayers” for the victims of the accident, followed by the usual promises to fully investigate its causes. None of this will help the injured, the bereaved families of the victims or the traumatised rescue workers.

The Bavarian State Minister of Transport, Christian Bernreiter (CSU), blatantly denied any responsibility. It was currently assumed “that some technical cause either on the vehicle or on the track must be the cause,” he said in an interview with Bayrischer Rundfunk. Bavaria was not responsible for this, Bernreiter said, because “the expansion of the rail infrastructure is the responsibility of the federal government.”

Bavarian Interior Minister Joachim Herrmann (CSU) also made clear that his real concern was not for the victims and the injured, but for the G7 summit, which will take place June 26-28 at Elmau Castle, not far from the site of the accident. The summit’s task will be to intensify the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Infrastructure restoration will also be put on hold for the G7 summit. “In any case, one has to see to what extent construction measures can be carried out with a view to the G7 summit,” Hermann told BR. He was referring to an overhead line mast that one of the derailed wagons had pulled down with it, leaving it on the side of the wagon. Meanwhile, the Oberau tunnel will also serve as an access route to the G7 summit at Elmau Castle.

The tragic rail accident near Garmisch-Partenkirchen confirms what the “profits before lives” policy in the pandemic and the government’s €100 billion armaments programme have already shown. While hospitals and schools are being cut to the bone—when it comes to the profits of the banks and corporations and the increase in share prices, human lives are worth nothing.



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