

Fire in Berlin's Grunewald forest demonstrates the political recklessness of the municipal authorities

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The largest forest fire in Berlin, Germany, since the Second World War has once again demonstrated the irresponsibility of the capital's municipal government, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and the Greens.

Teacher shortages, dilapidated schools, a dysfunctional administration in which the simplest trip to the authorities becomes a marathon, as well as a decaying infrastructure have long been permanent issues in Germany's capital. Now there is also the irresponsible storage of tons of old munitions and confiscated fireworks in the middle of a recreation area, and a fire brigade that has been cut to the bone and was unable to bring the foreseeable catastrophe under control for days.

For reasons that have not yet been explained, numerous explosions occurred early on Thursday morning at a police explosives testing and destruction facility in the middle of Berlin's Grunewald forest. There are 30 tonnes of ammunition and explosive ordnance on the site, as well as several hundred kilograms of fireworks.

World War II bombs, which are still being discovered in Berlin and the surrounding area, are brought to the site on a weekly basis. Confiscated pyrotechnics are also stored there. Controlled detonations then take place at intervals of several months, most recently in April.

After the fire broke out, a column of smoke developed that could be seen for kilometres over the forest, and more explosions were heard. On the hottest day so far this summer, the fire spread throughout the dry forest area as the day progressed. About 42 hectares were affected

Despite support from the police, the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) and the THW federal civil protection agency, the fire brigade has not yet been able to completely extinguish the fire. On Sunday, emergency forces were still fighting the enormous heat that had developed. The fire brigade explained that the flames were currently under control, but that it was always possible they could flare up again. Some

spots on the ground were as hot as 700 degrees Celsius.

The fire brigade is still unable to reach the explosives facility because of the continuing danger of detonations. Two Second World War bombs were torn from their moorings and must first be cooled down.

Nearby regional and suburban railway lines in the direction of Potsdam remained closed until Saturday, and the Avus city motorway remained closed to traffic until Monday. A one-kilometre exclusion zone has been set up in the local recreation area, which no one may enter except the emergency services.

The fire has once again thrown a spotlight on the decrepit state of the fire brigade in Berlin. While the demands from fires occurring are becoming ever greater as a result of climate change, savage cuts in equipment and personnel have been made for years. "The overload has been clear for a long time," *Tagesspiegel* quoted a spokesperson for the German Fire Brigades Union (DFeuG) in Berlin-Brandenburg. A report by the state audit office shows an additional need for 1,000 jobs—and that under normal conditions.

The workload is therefore enormous, as the number of states of emergency that have been called shows. A state of emergency is declared when ambulances are working at 80 percent capacity and the specified arrival time of ten minutes for patients can hardly be met. In 2020, a state of emergency was declared 64 times; in 2021, the number tripled to 178. Now, it also looks as if this record will be broken halfway through the year. It is clear that the delayed arrival of rescue services and the fire brigade, and their exhausted personnel, acutely endanger the lives of those affected.

Due to the extreme situation of the professional fire brigade, many members of the volunteer fire brigade were also put on duty on Thursday to staff services in the city. According to official reports, there were also more volunteer fire brigade officers than professional fire fighters in Grunewald on Friday night. The spokesperson for the

firefighters' union reported complaints from the ranks of the volunteer fire brigade because they are being so frequently and regularly called upon for duty.

In addition, more than 50 THW staff were deployed at the major fire in Grunewald. They set up several 30,000-litre pools to service the fire engines, laying a network of hoses from surrounding lakes to fill them.

The Bundeswehr deployed a "Dachs" bulldozer tank, which created five-kilometre-long breaks in the forest to contain the fire. In addition, a "Teodor" demolition robot was deployed, which had also been used in the Afghanistan war. The Bundeswehr cynically announced that the fire breaks should remain in place; they could "be used by the Berlin population after this crisis as beautiful cycling and hiking paths due to their extension," a spokesperson said.

The police provided water cannons—one of the few technical devices with which Berlin is well equipped, being more regularly used against squatters and left-wing demonstrators.

Not available, on the other hand, were fire-fighting helicopters and aircraft that could have extinguished the forest fire from the air. German fire brigades do not have their own fire-fighting helicopters. The Bundeswehr's fire-fighting helicopters are currently deployed in Saxony, where large forest fires have been raging for weeks. Despite the increasing number of forest fires, there are no fire-fighting aircraft in Germany.

It is pure luck that the fire broke out in the night hours and did not claim any victims. The impact on the forest will only be seriously assessed after the fire-fighting operations are over.

After the incident, the authorities emphasized the supposedly high safety precautions at the explosives facility, saying there was a fire break around the site and a fire alarm system. The ammunition depots were continuously sprayed with water in summer so that the phosphorus they contain does not ignite at high temperatures, it was said.

The Berlin police even went so far as to say that the explosives facility in the middle of a forest area was an advantageous location. Berlin police president Barbara Slowik said, "Currently, this facility is the only one that can be approved on Berlin land, with 80,000 square metres, far away from residential areas, which has also greatly benefited the fire brigade."

It has been known for decades that the facility in a recreational area that attracts thousands of people every day is literally a ticking bomb. A facility for the destruction of weapons has existed here since 1950. The police are responsible for this and have had to admit that for a long time there had been repeated discussions about relocating it for safety reasons.

With German reunification 32 years ago, when West Berlin lost its insular location in the middle of the former East Germany (GDR), it would have been possible to relocate the explosives and storage site to less dangerous locations in sparsely populated Brandenburg. But plans to do so always came to nothing. In 2004, an application was made to relocate the site, but the SPD and Left Party Senate (Berlin state executive) at the time rejected it. Speaking at the site of the fire, Berlin's mayor, Franziska Giffey (SPD) tersely declared that this would have to be reconsidered.

The same indifference with which the establishment parties treat the safety and lives of the population and have allowed the coronavirus to run wild in the pandemic, can also be seen in their reaction to climate change and its devastating consequences, which are increasingly apparent in the Berlin-Brandenburg region.

The summer months are getting hotter every year and less rain falls, which results in drier soil and underbrush. Brandenburg is considered one of the driest regions in Germany with the fire brigade called out dozens of times during the summer months because of forest fires.

It is foreseeable that the SPD-Left Party-Green Senate will not draw any conclusions from the major fire in Grunewald. Representatives of the governing parties merely declared after the fire that they "wanted to talk about it."

Environment Senator (state minister) Bettina Jarasch (Greens) said, "Of course, this has to do with climate change—not this fire, mind you, but the overall increase." She added that one must be prepared for it. Her only conclusion from this was to build up more mixed forest areas instead of coniferous forest.

The SPD, Greens and the Left Party are continuing and intensifying their austerity policies in all areas of public and social infrastructure in the current legislative period. Niklas Schrader, responsible for domestic issues in the Left Party's state parliamentary group, explained that Berlin had taken the right path in recent years in dealing with the fire brigade.

Instead of increasing the urgently needed material and personnel, there should be a "more efficient approach." The Senate's domestic affairs administration also expressed this view: "The fire brigade is basically well positioned for all foreseeable emergency situations in the city," said a spokeswoman.



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