

# Flood in Germany's Ahr Valley: Many lives could have been saved

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More than a year after the disastrous flooding that devastated parts of the German states of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia as well as parts of Belgium during the night of July 14-15, 2021, claiming the lives of 134 people in Germany's Ahr Valley alone, new video has emerged confirming that a large number of the deaths could have been prevented if the responsible politicians had reacted appropriately.

The video was taken by a police helicopter that flew the length of the Ahr Valley on the evening of July 14, 2021, capturing dramatic images, especially on the upper Ahr between the towns of Mayschoß and Schuld. However, the video only reached the Rhineland-Palatinate state parliament committee investigating the flood disaster at the end of September 2022. They were shown to the members of the investigating committee, excluding the media and the public, and made available to the public days later, partially pixelated for data protection and privacy.

The video shows the devastating situation in which the people of the upper Ahr valley already found themselves on the evening of the first night of the flood. The recording was made between 22:14 and 22:44, several hours before the raging flood reached the lower Ahr and swept many more people to their deaths.

Whole areas are visibly flooded, villages are enclosed by masses of water, many houses are inundated to the roof. Again and again, viewers see points of light belonging to people trying to draw attention to themselves from the balconies or roofs of their houses, hoping to be rescued. At one point in the video a car is seen floating by with its interior lights illuminated. It is not possible to tell whether there are people inside.

A warning based on this footage and the timely evacuation of homes along the lower river could have saved the lives of many people who were swept away

by the flood or drowned in their apartments and homes.

This includes the 12 people who drowned on the first floor of a house belonging to Assisted Living for the Disabled (Lebenshilfe für Behinderte) in the town of Sinzig, which is located just above where the Ahr flows into the Rhine. The sole caregiver that night, responsible for both houses of the facility, could not assist every resident requiring help to a higher floor as the fast-moving flood wave bore down on the complex.

The video from the police helicopter proves the criminal inaction of the Rhineland-Palatinate state government, a coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and liberal Free Democrats (FDP), and in particular of Interior Minister Roger Lewentz (SPD).

The Situation Center of the Ministry of the Interior requested the police helicopter itself in order to get a more detailed picture of the situation in the flooded area. Any layman who watches the now published video sees clearly that the situation required an immediate and urgent mobilization of supra-regional rescue forces and the warning and evacuation of those down river. Yet nothing of the sort occurred that night.

Ostensibly the video footage never reached the Situation Center. It was only in recent weeks, as the state parliament's investigative committee requested more material, that they were allegedly discovered on the external hard drive of a member of the helicopter crew.

The claim that the video footage did not reach the Situation Center, however, is contradicted by the fact that the pilot of the police helicopter sent a written report on the findings of the overflight, including still frames from the video footage, to the Interior Ministry's situation center by email that same night, describing the dramatic situation on the ground. A spokeswoman for the Interior Ministry confirmed that

the situation center received the report at 12:53 a.m.

Interior Minister Lewentz claims that he was not aware of the recordings, that he saw them for the first time when they were shown to the investigative committee on September 23 of this year. The credibility of this statement is open to question.

In any case, Lewentz's response to reporters' questions after the videos became known was scandalous. Until then, the interior minister had justified his inaction on the night of the floods by saying that he had no overall picture of the situation and no indications of a disaster. Now Lewentz explained that one could see a "strong high-water" on the videos, but not a catastrophe. There were no collapsed houses, he said, no bridges washed away, no destroyed railroad lines to be seen, as became visible in the light of morning.

Asked whether the pictures would have changed his attitude if he had seen them that night, the minister answered "not likely." After all, he said, you can see rescue workers in the pictures, everything that was under the lead of fire departments and the Federal Technical Relief Agency (THW), Bundeswehr (army), rescue service organizations, the Life Savers Association (DLRG) and others. "I wouldn't have had any further way to help."

Lewentz ultimately resigned from his post on October 12, two and a half weeks after the video was shown to the investigative committee. "Today I take political responsibility for mistakes made in my area of responsibility," he said, explaining his move. Minister President Malu Dreyer (SPD) accepted the resignation, but left Lewentz in office on an acting basis until a successor was appointed. Lewentz left open whether he would also resign as chairman of the Rhineland-Palatinate SPD.

Lewentz's conduct is just one example of the indifference and contempt for the lives and safety of the population displayed by so many politicians during and after the disastrous flood. In April of this year, Rhineland-Palatinate's Environment Minister Anne Spiegel (Greens) and North Rhine-Westphalia's Environment Minister Ursula Heinen-Esser (CDU) were forced to resign for going on vacation during or shortly after the flood and then spoke untruthfully to the respective committees of inquiry about it.

Shortly after the flood, the *World Socialist Web*

*Site* stated, "The severe consequences of the flood were not simply the result of a natural disaster of 'unimaginable proportions,' but the result of the irresponsibility of politicians and authorities at the federal, state and local levels. Above all, that the flood killed so many people and caused such devastating damage is a direct result of the criminal inaction of federal and state governments."

Commenting on the resignation of Environment Minister Spiegel, the WSWS said, "Minister Spiegel embodies a social milieu whose world revolves only around their own sensitivities, prepared to walk over corpses to advance their careers, and with nothing but contempt for the less well off."

This irresponsibility and contempt for the working class is likewise shared by Prime Minister Malu Dreyer (SPD), who did nothing on the night of the flood to limit its deadly effects.

The local population has reacted to the release of the video and Interior Minister Lewentz's reaction with a mixture of incomprehension and anger. Concerned residents told broadcaster ZDF's *Länderspiegel* program on October 8: "Anyone who doesn't see a catastrophe on the videos is totally out of place." One woman asked, "Who is being convicted? No one!" One resident said, "In Sinzig, in this facility, where the flood arrived some three or four hours later, people could have been saved."

The indifference and contempt for the lives and needs of the population expressed in Roger Lewentz's conduct shows the real priorities of all capitalist parties. His resignation will do nothing to change this.

The same contempt is evident in the profit-before-lives politics during the coronavirus pandemic, which has already cost over 150,000 lives in Germany, and by the reckless war policy pursued by all parties represented in the Bundestag (German Federal Parliament), despite the danger of a nuclear third world war. Only a united movement of the international working class based on a socialist program can put an end to this madness.



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