

20 years since the death of Oury Jalloh in a Dessau police cell

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On January 7, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Oury Jalloh's death, several hundred people took to the streets of the East German city of Dessau. Oury, a 35 year old man from Sierra Leone and the father of a two-year-old son, was chained hand and foot and burnt to death in a cell at the Dessau-Rosslau police station on January 7, 2005.

Two decades later, the German state still refuses to clarify the circumstances of his death and hold to account those responsible.

Demonstrators who marched from the police station in Dessau-Rosslau to the city courthouse last week carried signs and banners remembering not only Jalloh, but also the many other victims of police violence in Germany.

One banner denounced the police murder of Mouhamed Lamine Dramé, a youth who was killed in Dortmund two and a half years ago. A few days earlier, on December 12, 2024, the Dortmund Regional Court acquitted all five police officers involved in his death.

The official version of Jalloh's death remains that he killed himself. Although he was chained hand and foot to a cell bed, it is claimed he managed to fish a lighter out of his pocket, tear a hole in a flame-retardant mattress and set it and himself completely ablaze in just 20 minutes. This version is not only absurd, it has already been refuted multiple times, including by professional investigators and international experts.

This is also the conclusion reached in a new six-part Crime Time series on Germany's ARD TV channel. The filmmakers refrained from presenting a so-called "balanced picture" repeating the cynical comments of the police station manager Hanno Schulz. According to Schulz, the police officers dealing with Jalloh were "two very calm, reserved representatives." Schulz declared there had "to be an end sometime" with the

investigations. Nevertheless, the ARD film makes the course of events sufficiently clear.

In the early morning of January 7, 2005, Jalloh approached two women on the street saying he wanted to make a phone call. The women called emergency services. Two police officers then arrived and arrested Jalloh, who had been drinking and resisted his arrest. He was taken by force to the police station and a short time later lay severely injured on a mattress in cell 5. As a later autopsy demonstrated, at this point his nasal bone and several ribs were broken, his eardrum had burst and he had suffered a skull fracture.

After the police officers left Jalloh in his injured state, tied to his cell bed, the fire alarm went off in cell 5 of the police station. The police chief on duty responded by switching off the alarm twice. By the time someone finally checked, thick black smoke was coming out of the cell. Jalloh was not only dead, he was found burnt beyond recognition.

The official investigations were conducted extremely carelessly; a video team destroyed recordings from the scene of the crime, so there remains no record on film. The public prosecutor's office refused to have the body X-rayed and it was left to Jalloh's friends to arrange this later at their own expense in order to determine his injuries.

Original charges of "involuntary manslaughter" ended in an acquittal of all police officers because the witnesses for the prosecution changed their testimony retrospectively and all of the police kept silent. A charred lighter that turned up in the evidence from the cell cannot have come from the scene of the crime. This fact was established by later investigations by Jalloh supporters.

It emerged that two other men had already died at the same police station before Jalloh and the investigations

into these deaths had not yet been completed in January 2005. This raises the question if there was an attempt to cover up multiple police murders.

Over the years, additional private and official fire tests have clearly shown that the fire that took place in cell 5 could not have started without an accelerant. The research group Forensic Architecture (FA) reconstructed the course of events. They concluded that such a fire requires the draft of an open door. All of this clearly proves that Jalloh, locked in and handcuffed, could not have set himself on fire.

More than twelve years after his death, the senior public prosecutor in Dessau finally opened a murder investigation. But shortly afterwards, the case was taken away from him and handed over to another public prosecutor in Halle, who quickly declared the case closed. When politicians in the state parliament asked questions and demanded clarification, the minister of justice lied to parliament about the state of the investigation. In late 2017, the public prosecutor's office officially closed the investigation.

When Oury's brother Saliou Jalloh turned to the Higher Regional Court in Naumburg in 2019, the court dismissed the proceedings. Eventually, Saliou Jalloh took the case to the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe, but in February 2023, this court also closed the file on the murder in cell 5. Its main argument was that the termination of the investigation by the Higher Regional Court of Naumburg did not violate the constitution. Finally, an attempt to file a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights also failed; the complaint was rejected on the grounds of a formal error.

For 20 years, the police, judiciary and politicians have denied that Oury Jalloh could not have set himself on fire under any circumstances. To this day, the absurd version of suicide is accepted and established in the courtrooms of Dessau, Magdeburg, Halle and Naumburg, in the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt, and most recently in Karlsruhe and The Hague.

It has been declared that the case is legally closed in Germany. But as the Initiative in Memory of Oury Jalloh correctly writes in its press release, the facts speak "a clear language: this was murder! A murder that must not be a murder." And, as the press release continues, the crime of murder is not subject to time limits. "The fight for clarification and justice will

continue until the Oury Jalloh affair has been resolved and the perpetrators held to account!" Saliou Diallo, Oury's brother, described last week's rally in Dessau as another "anniversary of the fight for the truth."

The years of cover-ups and denials by the German judiciary in this and other cases represents a serious warning. Justice will not come from these forces. In today's world of escalating war, the priority of the government and state, including the courts and all the state organs of violence, is not to focus on education and mutual understanding, but increasingly on confrontation. Tragic attacks on migrants such as those in Solingen, Mannheim and most recently Magdeburg are being used as an excuse to arm the police and intensify agitation against refugees and migrants.

In the Alternative for Germany (AfD), party leader Alice Weidel is now openly and loudly raising the far right slogan of 'remigration'—but such a policy is not restricted to the AfD. All of the main parliamentary parties—the Social Democratic Party, the Greens, the Free Democratic Party, the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union, Left Party and Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance—are pursuing similar policies, even though (or precisely because) they are involved in an election campaign. Such policies are directed principally against the working class, which is facing major struggles in the face of attacks on its jobs, wages and rights. Only the struggle for a socialist, international perspective can ultimately ensure genuine justice for the victims of police violence.



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