

The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

The German People makes clear the culprits behind the 2020 racist murders in Hanau are to be found among the German authorities

Verena Nees

27 February 2025

The German People (*Das Deutsche Volk*) by Marcin Wierzchowski was one of the highlights of this year's Berlinale. On February 19, 2020, right-wing terrorist Tobias Rathjen shot and killed nine people in the German city of Hanau, west of Frankfurt am Main. He injured another six people. Police later found the gunman and his mother dead in his apartment.

Marking five years since the far-right attack, Wierzchowski's film powerfully documents the struggle of the bereaved and their supporters against racism in the German police and security apparatus, as well as the refusal of the political authorities to take any effective action.

The title of the film refers to the monument to the famed Brothers Grimm in Hanau's market square, which bears the inscription "The German People." Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859) Grimm, academics and folklorists, came from Hanau and took part in the 1848 revolution.

Jacob Grimm proposed an amendment to the ill-fated German draft constitution in the Frankfurt National Assembly, which met in the city's St. Paul's Church in 1848. Like many other progressive initiatives at the time, the motion—which read, "The German people are a people of free men, and German soil tolerates no servitude. It sets strangers and the unfree who dwell on it free"—was rejected. But the Brothers Grimm still had many supporters among the rising bourgeoisie and the population at large.

The relatives of the victims of the Hanau shootings wanted to erect their own memorial against racism to commemorate their dead at this—and no other—location, but this proposal too was turned down by the authorities.

The victims of the February 2020 massacre, shot at random, were young workers, plus a single mother of two, most of whom were born and raised in Hanau and the surrounding area. Some of their families had originally come from the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria and Afghanistan. Three belonged to the Roma minority, a population persecuted and murdered by the Nazis.

Rathjen, a graduate in business administration, was known to the authorities for his hatred of foreigners, women, Muslims and Jews.

He legally owned several weapons and regularly took shooting lessons. Six days before the attack, he posted a document on his website containing Nazi fantasies of annihilation, virtually announcing his intention to commit murder. He also at one point accused US president Donald Trump of stealing his slogans.

From the outset, *The German People* makes it clear that the Hanau tragedy was not simply a case of a psychopathic individual, as the German police, public prosecutor, politicians and media claim, nor was it a case of "run of the mill" racism on the part of the so-called "man on the street." The murderer acted under the very noses of the state and its politicians, who have systematically stoked anti-foreigner sentiment. It was "official racism," as one affected father states in Wierzchowski's film.

"We are angry about the promotion of far-right sentiment that makes such acts possible," young people yell at a demonstration one year after the murders. Soon after the massacre, the news broke that the special police commando (SEK) unit deployed in the area at the time was itself riddled with neo-Nazis. In light of this revelation, the state government of Hesse was forced to disband the unit.

The main characters in the film are the relatives of the dead and their friends and colleagues from Hanau, who organise their own initiative to investigate the crime and demand a memorial for the dead. They fought for a parliamentary commission of inquiry, which ultimately revealed that the authorities and police contributed significantly to the deaths of the young people.

On the night of the crime, the police emergency line was inoperative. Subsequently, with the help of lawyers and the British research collective Forensic Architecture, relatives found out that the emergency exit of the Arena Bar, where most of the people died, had apparently been locked by police.

The film's calm camerawork excels, with sober black-and-white shots, surprising cuts and contrasting changes of scene, including audio and video recordings of politicians' speeches, memorial services and rallies and—again and again—the families and friends of the dead, their faces marked by horror, incomprehension and suffering, seeking to find the words in German to express their memories.

The start of *The German People* is striking: shouts at with the names of the dead, then the babble of voices breaks off—in the sudden silence, one hears scraping noises. Someone appears working on a piece of stone, it is Vili Viorel's father, Niculescu P?un. “Granite, that's granite from Italy,” he asserts, pounding on the stone. “This is for my heart, for my son.” The camera pans up, and we see a kind of mausoleum in a cemetery, with photos of Vili and the other victims attached to the outer wall.

As Vili's father continues to carve the stone, we hear radio messages from the night of the assault: “How many dead at Heumarkt—so, five so far?” After that, an address by the German President Frank Walter Steinmeier, who, with feigned sympathy, declares that the act was “an attack on all of us.” There are those, however, who take a different view. This was not an attack on “all of us,” i.e., those with a white skin who originate from the local region of Westphalia or Breslau, but rather was directed against those with “dark skin and dark hair,” who are regarded as “outsiders.”

Later, Sedat Gürbüz's Turkish mother says that for a long time she did not feel like an outsider. Her 29-year-old son, she says, was born locally in Langen and grew up in Dietzenbach. She adds, “He was proud of himself, always wanted to become independent, wanted to be boss.” The hookah bar that he managed was one of the crime scenes where he himself died.

Viorel, a Roma from Romania and the only child of his parents, came to Germany in 2013 at the age of 16 to earn money for his mother's medical treatment. He worked as a courier driver and on the night of the attack tried to stop the perpetrator with his car until the latter shot him through the windscreens. Prior to his death, he had dialed the police emergency number four times, but no one answered.

The police later apologised, claiming there was only one emergency call centre in Hanau that day and it needed updating.

Vili's father holds the cell phone up to the camera: he tried to contact his son repeatedly after he heard about a shooting on the radio. It was only 18 hours after the crime, when he was already at work, that he and his wife were informed of their son's murder. A similar story was recounted by the father of 22-year-old Hamza Kurtovi?, who had just completed his training as a warehouse worker. The family had immigrated from the Bosnian part of Yugoslavia years ago.

The next day, they suddenly received a message with a postmortem report and a request to identify and wash the body—if it was their son. The father is outraged: “The report stated that the body was of a man with an ‘Oriental southern’ appearance.” He shows the photo of his son, who in fact looks typically German with blond hair and “blue eyes,” as the father emphasises.

The director shows the affected families without embellishment, including their religiosity and prayers. A scene begins with a funeral service in the Orthodox Church. The priest blesses the relatives, then suddenly there is a sharp cut to a young boxer throwing punches across the entire screen from left to right. Prayers are followed by a fight!

The boxer is a friend of Viorel and other victims in the Arena Bar that fateful evening. He saved his own life by hiding behind the bar. After training, he sits in front of the gym entrance and

repeatedly the same sentences over and over again, in disbelief. He says he has never experienced anything like it in his life: he was having fun with his friends in the bar and suddenly three of his friends are dead. “I can't believe it, three friends dead, and I'm throwing dirt on their coffins!”

This bitter experience is increasingly combined with a loss of political illusions. Despite a parliamentary committee of inquiry, initially supported by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the friends and relatives of the dead encounter growing resistance, including from the state's opposition parties, to their plea for a memorial on the market square, the site of the Grimm memorial.

Hanau's mayor, Claus Kaminsky (SPD), repeatedly rejected designs for such a memorial on the market square, saying that anonymous criticism of such a plan has been received from the public. At most, something could be installed in a different place. In a hearing with the city council and the mayor, there is a heated exchange. Çetin Gültekin, brother of the murdered Gökhan Gültekin, emphasises that either the memorial stands in the market square or the relatives would rather do without it.

He opposed the cowardly excuse that there had allegedly been letters from the public opposing this spot. “In other locations, people hurry by. It's better not to have a memorial at all,” he says. It is important for the whole of society “to be confronted every day with what happened,” he adds.

Sedat's mother, Emi? Gürbüz, points out that her son always met with his friends in the market square. She expresses her hatred for the politicians and the mayor, who has continuously shrugged off the relatives.

Mayor Kaminsky is offended and responds that he had to “catch his breath.” At a meeting with the chancellor a week earlier, he asserts, Mrs. Gürbüz had already shouted out that she “hates Germany and all Germans.” Sedat's mother promptly interrupts him, replying indignantly: “I said Germany, but not all Germans.”

At a later rally, Niculescu P?un sums up his experience of politics as follows:

There used to be skinheads in bomber jackets and combat boots. Today, however, the neo-Nazis are sitting in parliament wearing ties and suits! You are nurturing them, protecting them. You say that (the racist murders in) Mölln must not happen again, Hanau must not happen again, but it will keep happening unless fundamental action is taken.

The German People is a remarkable film that strives for the truth in a manner both serious and artistically empathetic. It provides an effective counterweight to the current flood of right-wing agitation against migrants and refugees, which assumed a completely new dimension in the German election campaign.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact