

Keep Calm and Carry on – How Germany Deals with Terrorist Attacks

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A week of horror – four attacks in just 6 days ++ Keep calm and carry on ++ Is the media overstrained? ++ No chance for right-wing populists. by Eike Hortsch

A week of horror – four attacks in just 6 days

Germany through lived four attacks in July. On July 18th an Afghan refugee attacked passengers on a local train near Würzburg in Southern Germany with an axe. Four victims were severely injured and the perpetrator was shot by the police when he tried to escape. Just a few days later, a German-teenager with Iranian descent went on a rampage in a shopping centre in Munich. He killed 9 young people and injured more than 30 people before shooting himself. Two days after that, a Syrian refugee hacked a pregnant woman to death with a machete. The last attack happened on July 24th in Ansbach, a small town in Bavaria, where a Syrian refugee tried to ignite a bomb at a concert. Security refused him to enter the festival area, so he blew himself up in front of the place, injuring 15 people.

Keep calm and carry on

Germany is reacting to the attacks with calmness. The backgrounds of each of the four assaults are different: The reason for the attack with the machete was probably relationship trouble, say the police. The attacker was a refugee from a war-torn country and probably traumatised. The same goes for the attackers of Ansbach and Würzburg: Both were young refugees partly with special support for unaccompanied minor refugees. One was living in a family, the other one was to be deported to Bulgaria because his application for asylum was refused. He had already been in psychiatric treatment and twice tried to commit suicide. Both acted in the name of the Islamic State (IS). It is unclear, and for most people inexplicable, how and why they radicalised. Right now, the police assume that they radicalised in a very short period through different IS websites and social media. So far, there seems to be no evidence for connections to IS terrorists elsewhere. That is why the police describes the perpetrators as lonely wolves even if the IS claims that they are IS-terrorist. For society, this is an ambivalent finding. On the one hand, there is no active terrorist-network operating in Germany. On the other hand, it seems illusory to identify potential lonely wolves in the run up of an assassination.

The Munich attack had nothing to do with Islamism and rather fits in the category of high school shootings. The perpetrator, David Ali Sonboly, had been bullied and suffered from depression. He had read literature on school shootings and, in 2015 he had visited the town of Winnenden, where a school mass shooting took place in 2009. He executed his attack on the fifth anniversary of the massacre by Norwegian Anders Breivik in Oslo and on the island of Utoya. Even though he has a migrant background, Sonboly – like Breivik – showed admiration for Adolf Hitler. Further, he liked to play violent computer games. He had no affiliation with the IS or other Islamic groups. Therefore, the issues at play differ greatly. However, an increasing number of politicians and citizens raise concerns that the IS has smuggled in terrorists amid the refugees who arrived in Germany in recent years (more than one million in 2015 alone).

Is the media overstrained?

During the shooting in Munich, rumours of other attacks and several killers on the loose spread through social media. Even some TV-channels took up these rumours and videos without knowing their authenticity. In this situation, Munich's police spokesperson, Marcus da Gloria Martins, earned a lot of respect and praise for his matter-of-fact way of communication. He tried to cool down the speculation on twitter, facebook and TV saying, "Give us the chance to report facts. Don't speculate, don't copy from each other." For many, he is the hero of the Munich shooting because he helped to calm down the public debate online and offline.

No chance for right-wing populists

Afterwards, the public discussion of the attacks was mature, calm and acknowledged the very different backgrounds and circumstances of each case. Politicians have started an objective debate on how to address matters of internal security. The shooting in Munich raised the question of tighter gun laws. Since Germany has some of the strictest laws in the world, the

consensus is “no”.

With regard to the other attacks, the right-wing-populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) tried to gain some momentum for the upcoming local and state elections. In its first statements, the AfD questioned the migration-policy as a whole and even wanted to prohibit Muslims to seek for asylum. Looking at the latest polls and the relatively calm disposition in German society, they failed to exploit the attacks.

The state government of Bavaria, where three of the four attacks happened, counters the issue with more police forces. Furthermore, Bavarian politicians, including the state’s interior minister Joachim Herrmann, want stricter immigration rules and deploy the army in domestic emergencies. Both claims are highly controversial and actually not new for the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) that governs the state of Bavaria since 1945. In the midst of the migration crisis last year, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union) said, “we will make it”, about the challenge of integrating millions of refugees in Germany society. Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer rejected this claim and preferred a tougher migration policy ever since.

Chancellor Angela Merkel did not visit the crime scenes. She also waited a while before she addressed the public. In her summer press conference, she spoke about migration policy as a whole, less about the four attacks. She repeated her mantra “we will make it” – adding that she never said it would be easy.



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Police forces in the city of Munich, Bavaria
