Germany's Columbine


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Abstract (Article Summary)

No one could say how [Robert Steinhauser]'s expulsion might have turned a calm, reasonable guy into a murderer-or whether some other factor might have been involved. Whatever the reason, Steinhauser showed up late Friday morning armed with a pistol and a pump-action shotgun and began blowing away his victims. Police were on the scene just a few minutes after he began, alerted by a phone call from the school custodian.

Full Text (794 words)

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[Headnote]

A quiet European cathedral town is the tragic site of one of the bloodiest school massacres in history

[Photograph]

Above, students comfort each other near Johann Gutenberg High School; left, the expelled student identified as the shooter; below, the body of a teacher, one of 16 victims methodically killed

AT FIRST, STUDENTS WERE convinced it must be some sort of practical joke. Felix Vater, 17, came out of a classroom to find one of his teachers lying in the school hallway. "I felt his pulse and tried to talk to him," says Vater, "but he wasn't there anymore. You know blood from TV, and you just can't believe this is real." Denise Hoffman, 15, thought the three loud bangs she heard meant construction workers had dropped something. "Suddenly out of a room, a masked person appeared," she recalls. "Then he opened the door to another room and shot the teacher."

By the time the firing had stopped at midday last Friday, 16 people lay murdered in a scene of carnage that was grimly reminiscent of the Columbine massacre that took 15 lives in April 1999. The killer was a former student who dressed all in black for his murderous spree; he moved methodically through the building, picking his victims off one by one. And
in the end, with 12 teachers, two students, a school administrator and a policeman dead, he turned a pistol on himself.

All of it was tragically familiar—but no one could have imagined the setting. What now ranks among the worst school shootings in history took place at Johann Gutenberg High School in Erfurt, a quiet 13th century cathedral town in the state of Thuringia in eastern Germany. "It's the kind of thing you expect to happen in America," said a visibly upset anchorman on German television. With its tough guncontrol laws and a murder rate less than a quarter of the U. S.'s, Germany is not exactly a hotbed of random gun violence. But just as with the 1996 shooting that killed 18 in an elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland, a single gunman can make statistics irrelevant in the blink of an eye.

Police identified last week's killer as Robert Steinhauser, 19, who evidently had been expelled from the school in February for forging doctors' signatures on absence--excuse notes. Unlike the Columbine killers, Steinhauser was not a social outcast. "This doesn't fit into the picture I have of him," says Isabell Hartung, a former student who knew the shooter. "Everybody got on with him, and everybody liked him." Biology teacher Andreas Forster's take: "He was a very calm, reasonable guy."

No one could say how Steinhauser's expulsion might have turned a calm, reasonable guy into a murderer—or whether some other factor might have been involved. Whatever the reason, Steinhauser showed up late Friday morning armed with a pistol and a pump-action shotgun and began blowing away his victims. Police were on the scene just a few minutes after he began, alerted by a phone call from the school custodian. As they approached the building, Steinhauser leaned out of a window and shot officer Andreas Gorski in the head, killing him instantly. Then the gunman resumed his spree, which ended only when a teacher shoved him into an empty classroom and locked the door. It was there that Steinhauser shot himself, but the 500 unused bullets police found make it clear that he was prepared to claim many more victims.

In the attack's aftermath, Germany declared a day of national mourning. Flags were lowered to half-staff, and church bells tolled throughout Thuringia. In Erfurt thousands crammed into a church for an interfaith memorial service held just hours after the shooting. On Saturday, students, parents and teachers gathered in front of the school, where hundreds of bouquets, candles and toys filled the steps.

Even as observers comforted one another, crime-scene investigators in white plastic jumpsuits could be seen inside gathering evidence. Authorities are also looking into accounts of a second gunman who followed children into the schoolyard during the confusion and then fled.

But while a second killer would make the Columbine parallel even more exact, the incidents are identical in one sense: political leaders have been gravely shaken by a tragedy they thought could happen only in other places. Just like their American counterparts, German leaders are groping for ways to prevent such a thing from happening again. Says Interior Minister Otto Schily: "I don't believe we can turn our schools into fortresses now. That would be the wrong result." And even if they could, Germans may have to accept a fact that America has been facing in recent years: that people in charge of public safety may have to consult the darkest corners of their imagination.

-Reported by Charles P. Wallace/Erfurt

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