

Death Poses Questions for Greens

Margit

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FRANKFURT, Sept. 28, 1984—Like so many times before, groups from left, Green, and autonomous circles had called out their crews to protest a meeting of the neo-fascist NPD, taking place in a marginal neighborhood of Frankfurt, where Turkish and other immigrant workers predominate.

Like so many times before, German police were at hand to protect the right of the fascists to have their meeting. This time, the German police were very “efficient.” They forcefully beat away the protesters who were blockading the entrance. And then, one of their new water cannons chased and crushed a protester, Gunter Sare, to death.

Escalation of police armament and training in which the enemy-image of the left-wing demonstrator is used produced a calculated risk: murder—not an accident.

Half an hour later, Frankfurt banks, insurance companies, and corporate offices saw their window fronts smashed or set on fire. For a week, downtown Frankfurt was turned into angry battle scenes, with militance on both sides escalating, with hundreds of arrests, with many millions in damage.

Finally the Christian-Democratic Mayor Walter Wallman decreed a general ban on all demonstrations: any gathering of people protesting the recent brutal police actions was to be prevented so as to inhibit the spread of information on how Gunter was killed. The Saturday the ban went into effect, however, 2000 people ignored the 24-hour state of emergency which prohibited the right to free assembly. Spontaneous demonstrations also took place in Berlin, Munich, Freiburg, Gottingen, Hannover, Nurnberg, Hamburg and Kopenhagen.

Realists vs. Fundis

A committee formed to investigate Gunter Sare’s death charged that police prevented doctors and medical students from aiding the fatally wounded man by brutally clubbing them away from the scene of the accident. The police refused to radio for an ambulance but did radio for police enforcement.

Negotiations with the Social-Democratic SPD, which the Green Party of Hasse was engaged in (preparing for the first red-green coalition government) were suspended. The “realist” Greens pushing this coalition were attacked both from streetfighters and from the “fundamentalist” (anti-coalition) Greens for having voted for the police equipment which killed Sare.

Gunter was a participant in the Frankfurt Sponti movement for fifteen years. Mobilized through the extra-parliamentarian protest of 1968 and active in the housing (squatting) movement of the early ‘70s, he did not go the way of so many other students who by now have found niches either in academic jobs or with Green politics. He lived and worked in the multiethnic working-class neighborhood, Gallus, where he had helped build a multi-national autonomous center for immigrant workers and German comrades to cooperate and understand each other (established in 1974). While a lot of his old co-fighters had long become integrated, become “yuppies” or resigned, he was still active in The Gallus Center and was also on the board of a youth center for unemployed youth which were outside of parties and unsupported by state funding.

Confrontation with Neo-Nazis

On Saturday, September 28, it was the Turkish Gallus residents who put on a street fest: a party that was to end with a rally against the Neo-Nazis. It was supported by the local Social Democrats, the Communist Party, the Greens and various immigrant groups. Nobody had expected what was to happen. The times seemed to promise more in terms of cooperation and integration than repression. Paralysis was deep and widespread. And so everybody—including the participants—was surprised at how effective and resilient the spontaneous organizational structures turned out to be. In spite of mass arrests, in spite of scary encounters with the riot police, night after night thousands of people were out to demonstrate their outrage, pain, and political determination to the city. Much of this organizational infrastructure was in place because it had emerged and consolidated during the years of struggle against the airport expansion outside of Frankfurt. The fact that it could be reactivated, and with such intensity, was certainly due to the depth of the shock: one of US has been killed—years after such events were held to be likely.

In the face of this death, no discussions seemed necessary to determine the “legitimacy” of the window smashing. Street militancy was a rather helpless, but widely accepted reaction. However, it was mostly the “kids” (as they are called by the established leftists and by the Greens) who carried out these actions, thereby underlining the growing cleavage between two protesting political cultures in Germany.

The first peaceful and legal demonstration (of 3000) was the one which accompanied Gunter’s burial. After that, at 2 p.m., the “state of emergency” went back into effect: police were hunting, beating, and arresting “suspicious”-looking people throughout the city.

The next day, old and young street-fighters fought it out in a meeting of 1000 on campus. Those who were Gunter’s comrades during the ‘70s had come to discuss the political consequences of the police murder and its aftermath. These street-fighters of ten years ago (like Danny Cohn-Bendit or Joschka Fischer) today put their energies into building the Red-Green coalition. (Joschka was just designated the Energy Minister for the State of Hesse.) Sitting on a panel, they were bombarded with an onslaught of eggs and arguments like these: “If you want to participate in the power system, you are responsible for Gunter Sare’s death. We don’t want reforms; we want to smash capital and society so we can build a free society.”

The young rebels, unemployed youth mostly, do not have or do not foresee a possibility to get an education or a decent job. They suddenly made the much-debated marginal or “two-tiered” society feel very real, palpably present in the auditorium. They rejected those who have jobs or even a leftist reputation, and they accused the latter of being at least partially responsible for Gunter’s death.

For the first time, the teach-in forced the old Spontis, the Alternatives, and the Greens to confront their own creeping insensitivity—an insensitivity instilled in them by their acceptance of the Realist compromise. They hope to finally get some of their pet projects off the ground through financial concessions forced from The SPD in exchange for the coalition agreement. Their definition of politics, had become so distorted by the fear of losing “their own political project” that they blinded and deafened themselves to other emerging, but very real, moral and political issues. This was the crucial message of the teach-in.

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