

School Shootings in the German Empire



Fig. 1: Class at the Worms school which the perpetrator later attended

Introduction

Just two days after an eighteen-year-old student in his penultimate year at Saarbrücken Gymnasium had fired gunshots at two classmates from short distance a local newspaper wrote on 27 May 1871: "Every now and then American students' ideas also flourish on German soil."

Objectives

Until recently, researchers assumed that the first occurrence of such an incident on German soil happened in the 1990s. In contrast to more recent school shootings, more elapsed offences have largely been unexplored. The present study aims at filling the gap.

Methods

Following casuistic research approaches, a qualitative analysis of numerous archive collections has been performed, including handwritten reports of the then headmaster addressed to the Royal Provincial Schools Council of Coblenz, the printed records of school events of Gymnasium Saarbrücken, various newspaper reports on the event and the court proceedings, wartime chronicles released in 1910 as well as comprehensive mental health records. The research results were subsequently compared with two other, more recent school shootings in Germany and in the United States.

Results

Various new files could be retrieved so that, for the first time, the perpetrator's life can now be reconstructed until his death in 1912. The crime shows clear parallels with more recent school shootings. The student had fired well-aimed gunshots at the heads of two of his classmates without any prior provocation, seriously injuring them. The motives for the crime were subjectively constructed and rooted in the school context. They go beyond a pure acquaintance crime in the sense of an individual act of revenge.

Conclusions

The present study disproves the widespread assumption that school shootings first appeared on German soil in the 1990s. Contrary to recent crimes, however, the lust for fame and media attention played no role at the end of the 19th century. In addition, in light of the new findings, the assumption made by other scientists of a narcissistic personality disorder needs to be revised. The fact that the perpetrator failed in his later development in all relevant aspects of life argues in favour of a chronification of his symptoms and the presence of a life-defining disease. He never lived a self-sufficient life but was put into different nursing homes where he lived on a permanent basis before dying at the age of 49. While the main focus was initially on the complex of positive symptoms of a paranoid schizophrenia, the emphasis later shifted towards the negative symptoms of a schizophrenic residuum.

Literature

Anatomie des Amoklaufs. Malaischer Mëngamok und School Shooting. (= Edition Centaurus – Neuere Medizin- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte), Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2019. [accepted for print]

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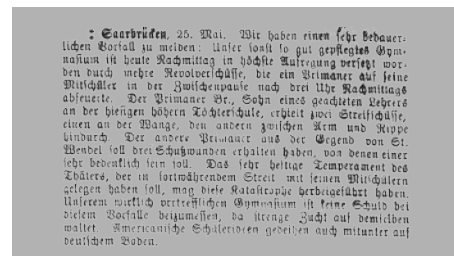


Fig. 2: Local newspaper "Trierische Volks-Zeitung" dated 27 May 1871

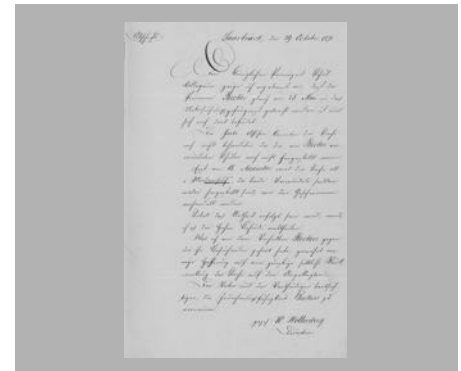


Fig. 3: Bericht des Schuldirektors vom 29. Oktober 1871



Fig. 4: Auszug aus der Krankenakte des Täters vom 27. Juni 1879