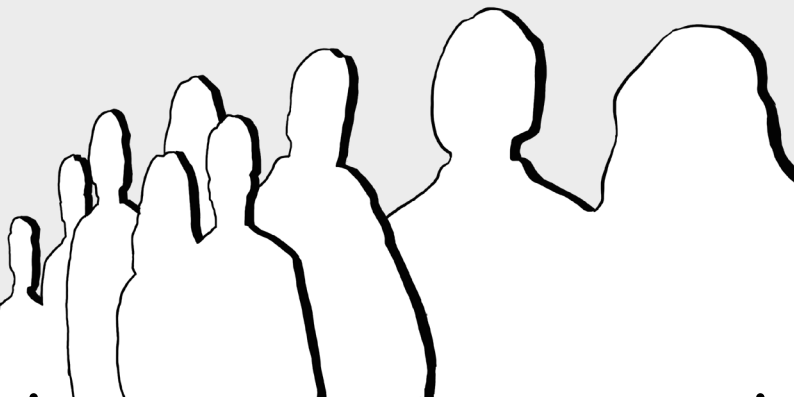




26 September 1980

The Oktoberfest Bomb Attack





Tatjana Neef

**26 September
1980**

**The Oktoberfest
Bomb Attack**

City of Munich (ed.)

In memory of those who lost their lives and in honour of the survivors and all those who will never forget that night: relatives, the emergency services, first responders and medical personnel.

Contents

Foreword Dieter Reiter, Mayor of Munich	6
1980 – The 146 th Oktoberfest	13
The Bomb Attack – 26 September 1980	13
After the Bomb Attack	16
Police Investigations	21
After Closing Proceedings in 1982: New Questions, New Findings	29
The Oktoberfest Bomb Attack in the Collective Consciousness	39
“Time heals no wounds” – The Consequences for Victims and their Families	47
Commemorative Research and Contemporary Witness Project of the Kulturreferat München (Department of Arts and Culture, Munich)	51
Sources	56
Picture Credits	58

Foreword

It is certainly not the first thing that comes to most people's minds when they think of the 'Wiesn'. But, nevertheless, it is inextricably linked to it – the Oktoberfest bomb attack of 26 September 1980. The devastating bomb explosion near the main entrance to the festival ground killed twelve people, including the perpetrator himself, and injured 221 others, some severely. It was the worst bomb attack in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. The bomber was identified as the extreme right-wing student Gundolf Köhler. His links to the extreme right political scene, however, were dismissed in the 1980s by the investigating authorities. This meant that the socio-political milieu surrounding the terrorism attack and the involvement of any possible accomplices were ignored for a long time.

The perpetrator, the Federal Public Prosecutor's office stated a few years ago, was part of the neo-Nazi scene and his motivation for the crime came from his extreme right-wing leanings. Gundolf Köhler wanted to murder people and then hold the political left responsible in order to influence the upcoming general election. Although the perpetrator's political background, his involvement in the neo-Nazi 'Wiking-Jugend' (Viking Youth) organisation and the right-wing paramilitary sports association, the 'Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann', was quickly established in 1980, the authorities maintained the theory that he was a lone perpetrator who had acted out of personal rather than political motives.

Survivors, the bereaved, journalists and lawyers doubted the results of the investigation that a single perpetrator had carried out the attack for non-political reasons, for decades. Their call for proceedings to be resumed was not met until 2014. Despite intensive efforts, these investigations did not result in the background to the attack being fully clarified either. The reasons for this are largely to be found in the massive shortcomings and failings of the original investigations, held immediately after the attack. The reopened proceedings, however, were also ultimately suspended once again in July 2020.

It is regrettable and disappointing that many questions remained unanswered as a result. My thoughts are, first and foremost, with the families of the victims and the many people who were injured in the bomb attack on 26 September 1980. For them, in particular, it would be important at long last to obtain clarity about the exact circumstances surrounding the attack and about possible accomplices. This has only been partially achieved. At a time when the ongoing threat of right-wing violence is becoming alarmingly apparent, the findings of the Federal Public Prosecutor General in 2020 are significant: Gundolf Köhler actions were motivated by his extreme right-wing persuasion.

The suffering of those affected cannot, of course, be put right. Nevertheless, it is an important signal, long-overdue, that the investigating authorities name and disclose the right-wing

extremist motivation behind the attack. After all, it is not just a question of mourning but of commemorative work and of carrying out a thorough historical analysis. Today, we must take a stand against extreme right-wing ideology and the violence this engenders, and actively campaign for a democratic and diverse society. For our democracy was not only under attack back then, it is under increasing attack today.

The City of Munich was slow in responding to the wishes of those affected who demanded a comprehensive investigation and sought to raise public awareness of this extreme right-wing bomb attack. In 2015, the Department of Arts and Culture initiated a participatory project to document the memories of survivors and those affected by the attack, the consequences it has had on their later lives, and their committed approach towards clarification and compensation. On the 40th anniversary in 2020, we opened the Oktoberfest Bomb Attack Documentation at the main entrance to the Theresienwiese festival ground, which has since been visited by a great number of Munich residents and tourists. The documentation was put together in close cooperation with those affected by the attack. In addition to information about the course of events, it features recollections – in the form of video interviews – by those who survived the right-wing terrorist attack and continue to suffer from its consequences to this day. I am very grateful to those affected who, through their openness, have made a significant contribution to ensuring that the events

of 26 September 1980 are not forgotten and to their warning of the dangers of extreme right-wing ideologies. I assure you that the City of Munich will continue to promote the clarification of such crimes and to continue its commemorative work in the future as well.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Dieter Reiter' in a cursive script.

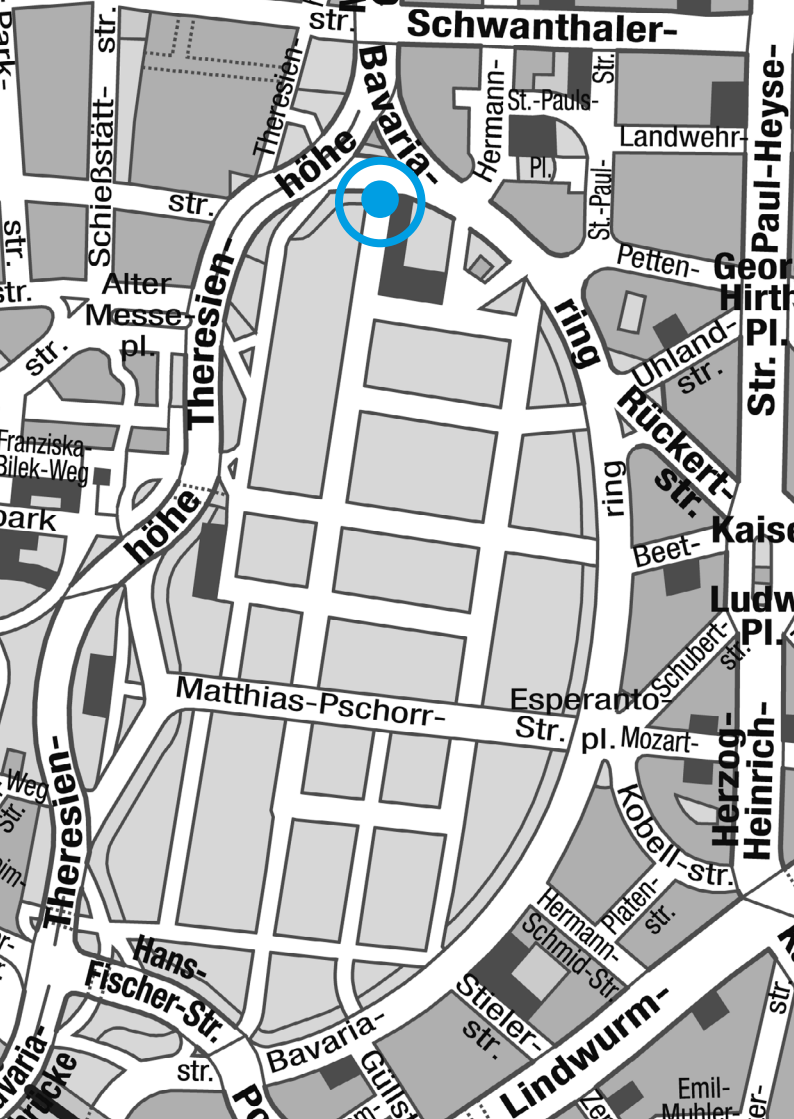
Dieter Reiter
Mayor of the City of Munich



1980 – The 146th Oktoberfest

The Bomb Attack – 26 September 1980

As in previous years, the 146th Oktoberfest attracted a large number of visitors. More than five million were drawn to the 76-acre festival ground, overlooked by the statue of 'Bavaria'. Late on 26 September 1980, shortly before the festival tents closed in the evening, the unthinkable happened. Opposite the traffic island on the Bavariaring circuit road on the northern side of the Theresienwiese, not far from the main entrance to the festival ground, a powerful explosion took place at 22:20. An explosive device placed in a metal litter bin mounted on a traffic sign pole exploded with devastating consequences. When the emergency services arrived on the scene they were confronted with injured persons and the dead on the road over a 23-metre radius. The blast accompanying the detonation was immense. Although the injured were taken care of immediately, help came too late for twelve people and the perpetrator himself. They died at the scene or in the hours and days that followed. 221 people were injured, 68 of them badly. Some of the victims suffered severe burns that were caused by the intense heat generated. As the police later reconstructed during their investigations, the bomb was a self-made explosive device. A number of people had injuries from metal splinters that were so bad that limbs had to be amputated or organs removed. Several victims were still being treated in hospital or rehabilitation clinics weeks or even months after the attack. To this day, physical and psychological problems continue to



plague the lives of some of the injured, their families and those who came to their aid or recovered the dead.

The Victims

[Gabriele Deutsch](#) (*1962)
[Robert Gmeinwieser](#) (*1963)
[Axel Hirsch](#) (*1957)
[Markus Hölzl](#) (*1936)
[Paul Lux](#) (*1928)
[Ignaz Platzer](#) (*1974)
[Ilona Platzer](#) (*1972)
[Franz Schiele](#) (*1947)
[Angela Schüttrigkeit](#) (*1941)
[Errol Vere-Hodge](#) (*1955)
[Ernst Vestner](#) (*1950)
[Beate Werner](#) (*1969)

and the perpetrator
[Gundolf Köhler](#) (*1959)

left: Overview of the 'Theresienwiese' festival ground;
crime scene and memorial site

After the Bomb Attack

One day after the bomb attack there was little to show there had been an explosion, apart from the flowers that has been placed on the site. On the one hand, this was due to where the centre of the explosion was, namely at the edge of the festival ground in a virtually undeveloped area. Neither fair-ground rides nor beer tents were damaged. Other than a few twisted traffic signs, broken paving slabs and burst window panes, the material damage was limited. One day after the bomb attack most had already been cleared up. On the other hand, Erich Kiesl, the mayor of Munich in office at that time, decided in the night of 26 to 27 September that the Oktoberfest should not close its gates. This decision, that some considered disrespectful, was based on two things: in addition to the already high number of visitors to the Oktoberfest that weekend, football fans were expected in the city for a match between Hamburger SV and FC Bayern München. The police feared that the disappointment of finding the festival tents closed could possibly turn into aggression that would be difficult to bring under control. And since it had been assumed that the bomb attack had a terrorist background, the decision also rested on the wish to demonstrate resolve. The mayor phrased it as follows: *“Neither this State, nor this city or its citizens will be held to ransom by criminals. A closure would only support the condemnable intention of the perpetrator. For this reason, we must say: life must go on.”*¹ And, so, the Oktoberfest continued; around one million people visited the

festival ground that weekend. An official mourning ceremony in the Old City Hall and an ecumenical church service, a wreath-laying ceremony and several other events to mark the attack took place four days later, on 30 September 1980. On that day, the Oktoberfest remained closed in memory of the victims of the bomb attack.

1 Schmalz, Peter, ‘Wir dürfen vor der Gewalt nicht kapitulieren’, in *Die Welt*, 1 October 1980



The Oktoberfest was suspended for one day on 30 September 1980



Mourners at the scene of the bomb attack



Memorial service in the Old City Hall, 30 September 1980

Police Investigations

The police started investigations immediately after the incident. Considering the severity of the bomb attack and the fact that Bundestag elections were to be held nine days later, expectations were very high that it would be cleared up quickly. Initial speculation about the reasons behind the bombing was rife. Nobody doubted that the explosion had been an act of terror. There seemed, however, to be some debate about what was behind the attack. Who was responsible for it? Was there more than one perpetrator? Was this a politically motivated act? And, if so, were those responsible to be sought in extreme left-wing or right-wing circles?

On 5 October 1980, elections for the 9th German Bundestag were held. The Federal Chancellor in office, Helmut Schmidt (SPD), managed to beat the contender from the Conservatives, the Bavarian Minister President Franz Josef Strauss (CSU). This had been preceded by a highly polarised election campaign dominated by the question of security policies.

Initially overshadowed by competency disputes at State and Federal Government levels, the Oktoberfest Task Force (Sonderkommission Theresienwiese – ‘Soko’) was set up, comprising – at times – around 100 officers from the Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation (Bayerisches Landeskriminalamt – LKA) and the Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt – BKA). Based on the suspicion that it could have been an act of terror, additional investigation proceedings against ‘persons unknown’ were opened by the Federal Public Prosecutor General at that time, Kurt Rebmann. The Federal Government, consequently, took charge of the investigation.

On Saturday, just one day after the bomb attack, the Soko had already identified the geology student [Gundolf Köhler](#) as the bomber. He had also died in the explosion. Witnesses had seen him at the scene of the crime just before the detonation. Particular features of the injuries on Köhler’s body backed up witnesses’ statements and left no doubt that he was the perpetrator – the first result of the investigation. The fact that Köhler himself could no longer be interrogated about the attack and the reasons behind it impeded further proceedings and left questions unanswered.

[Gundolf Köhler was born on 27 August 1959. He grew up in Donaueschingen where he attended the ‘Gymnasium’ and took his school leaving exams in 1978. Even as a youth he had experimented with explosives in the cellar of his parents’ house. During basic military service training he set his sights on an apprenticeship programme to become an explosives expert. However, due to a hearing disorder, he was prematurely dismissed from military service. Köhler, who had right-wing leanings, already had contact in the mid-1970s to several extreme right-wing organisations, especially the ‘Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann’ \(Paramilitary Sports Group Hoffmann; WSG\), founded by Karl-Heinz Hoffmann, and the ‘Wiking-Jugend’ \(Viking Youth; WJ\). Köhler also took part in paramilitary training exercises. In 1978 Köhler approached Karl-Heinz Hoffmann and asked him for his support in establishing a WSG group in Donaueschingen. Hoffmann, however, referred him to a WSG group that was already being established in Tübingen. After his military service Köhler started studying geology in Tübingen. On 26 September 1980 he carried out the bomb attack in Munich in which he was also killed.](#)

cf. Heymann, Tobias von, *Die Oktoberfest-Bombe. München, 26. September 1980 – Die Tat eines Einzelnen oder ein Terror-Anschlag mit politischem Hintergrund?* Berlin 2008, p. 51ff

Having established his identity, the first details about Köhler as a person, and his political leaning in particular, became known. Köhler had already been registered by the intelligence service in the past due to his contact to the extreme right-wing group, the [Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann \(WSG\)](#). In the light of this, it was assumed that the WSG – that had already been banned in January 1980 – was to be held responsible for the attack. As a consequence, the investigation focussed on this in the first few days. Parallel to the arrest of former members of the WSG, several house searches were carried out in the Federal Republic, including in Ermreuth Castle, the organisation's former headquarters and Hoffmann's home. Neo-Nazi material, grenades and explosives from military sources were seized. Shortly afterwards, the Bavarian Minister for Home Affairs, Georg Tandler (CSU) – the LKA being a division within his ministry – informed the public that the WSG was responsible for the bomb attack.² One day later, however, the members of the WSG were released from custody as a connection to the attack could not be proven. Tandler once again distanced himself from the theory of the WSG's involvement propagated at the outset and, from then on, only spoke of the attack being carried out by one individual. By contrast, a speaker for Kurt Rebmann, the Public Prosecutor, on the other hand, was more cautious. Although he did not dismiss the single perpetrator theory, he considered the participation of several people probable, without referring directly to the WSG.³ A dispute

[The 'Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann' \(WSG\) was a neo-Nazi influenced terrorist group that trained neo-Nazis in the martial arts as well as in the use of weapons and munition. It was founded in 1973 by the most prominent right-wing extremist in Germany in the 1970s, Karl-Heinz Hoffmann. Due to its anti-constitutional focus, the WSG was banned in January 1980 by the Federal Ministry of the Interior.](#)

cf. Fromm, Rainer, 'Die 'Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann': Darstellung, Analyse und Einordnung. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen und europäischen Rechts-extremismus, Frankfurt/Main et al., 1998, p. 439ff

2 Anon., 'Rebmann: Schwerster Anschlag' in *Bild*, 29 September 1980

3 Anon., 'Generalbundesanwalt hält Bombenleger nicht für Einzeltäter' in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 1 October 1980.

The 'Wiking-Jugend' (Wiking Youth; WJ) was a neo-Nazi youth organisation founded in 1952 in the Federal Republic of Germany. Its structure was strongly modelled on the Hitler Youth organisation. Children aged six and over could join; membership was for life. The political goal of the WJ was to educate young people in the Nazi tradition. Activities included camps and paramilitary marches. A total of around 15,000 children and teenagers were members of the Wiking Youth. Many later joined political organisations such as the Young National Democrats, the youth wing of the neo-Nazi NPD. In 1994, the Federal Ministry of the Interior banned the WJ because of its similarities to the NSDAP and the Hitler Youth organisation. With 400 to 500 members, it was considered the largest youth organisation in the right-wing extremist scene at the time.

cf.: Anon., 'Wiking-Jugend' in *Glossar der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, URL: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/500821/wiking-jugend/>

between the Bavarian ministry and the Public Prosecutor as to the possible involvement of a third party in the attack, ensued.

In the meantime, the police had been able to reconstruct the composition of the bomb. Thanks to fragments that had been recovered they came to the conclusion that the core of the bomb was self-made and consisted of a CO₂ propellant cylinder with a British mortar shell inside. A search of the cellar at the house of Gundolf Köhler's parents brought notes to light on how to make explosives and detonating devices, in addition to particles of paint that were of the same material as traces of paint found on the bomb splinters. They were seen as evidence that Köhler had not just detonated the bomb but had also built it himself. In the course of the weeks and months to follow, more than 1,800 witness were questioned in an attempt to reconstruct events surrounding the attack.⁴ Some eye-witnesses testified that they had seen Köhler near the scene of the crime accompanied by several others. These people, of whom only vague descriptions existed, were however never traced. Similarly, a case that Köhler allegedly had with him immediately before the attack was not among the pieces of evidence recovered nor was it ever found anywhere else.

4 cf. Heymann, Tobias von, op cit., p. 89

Although it had not been entirely possible to retrace the sequence of events surrounding the attack, the Bavarian LKA abandoned its investigations in May 1981. One-and-a-half years later, in November 1982, the Federal Public Prosecution terminated its investigations as well. The conclusions made in the final reports hardly differed from one another. In both, Gundolf Köhler is named as the sole perpetrator who built the bomb, took it to the scene of the attack and detonated it himself. The involvement of a third party is considered a possibility in the report of the Public Prosecution but deemed impossible to prove. Despite the level of suspicion initially, an involvement by the WSG is dismissed in both reports. Based on statements from people who knew Köhler, he is described as a young man with extreme right-wing leanings and with an exaggerated interest in explosives. Personal frustration and an uncontrollable hatred of his immediate surroundings were given as motives for the bomb attack.

After Closing Proceedings in 1982: New Questions, New Findings

Following the closure of official investigations in 1982, doubts about the conclusions reached were raised time and again, ultimately resulting in a number of different initiatives aimed at resolving unanswered questions. The lawyer Werner Dietrich, who still represents several of those injured in the attack to this day, filed a petition three times for proceedings to be reopened. His first two applications (in 1983 and 2008) were officially rejected by the Public Prosecutor “due to the lack of new evidence”. It was only at the third attempt in 2014 that Dietrich – and, as a consequence, all those who questioned the single bomber theory – was successful.

It was not only family members and victims of the attack who had doubts about the results of the investigation. Initiatives were also repeatedly launched from within the ranks of politics to have information surrounding the attack scrutinised once again. In 1981, the SPD member of parliament and Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Herta Däubler-Gmelin, made an interpellation for the re-evaluation of the Oktoberfest bomb attack after evidence had emerged that the explosives had possibly come from extreme right-wing circles. In 2005, on the 25th anniversary of the attack, an alliance of several organisations (comprising trade unions and anti-fascist associations, among others) as well as individual persons – including city councillors and regional and federal SPD politicians – attempted once again to have the LKA and BKA

re-open investigations. Four years later, members of parliament from the BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN fraction submitted a minor interpellation on the Oktoberfest bomb attack to the Bundestag.⁵ The reply issued by the Federal Government stated that “no sufficient or actual new leads or evidence” existed that could give occasion to investigations being resumed.⁶ All initiatives up until 2014 to have the case re-opened or a new investigation started were turned down by the Public Prosecutor and the BKA, always referring to insufficient leads and the lack of new evidence.

- 5 Minor interpellation by the MPs Hans-Christian Ströbele, Jerzy Montag, Volker Beck (Cologne), Monika Lazar, Silke Stokar von Neuforn, Wolfgang Wieland, Josef Philip Winkler and the BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN fraction, in Parliamentary Reports 16/13305, German Bundestag, 4 June 2009, ‘Oktoberfest-Attentat – Stasi-Notizen und Indizien betreffend Beteiligung der ‘Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann’ sowie Verbindungen zu ‘Gladio’
- 6 Reply from the German Government to the minor interpellation by the MPs Hans-Christian Ströbele, Jerzy Montag, Volker Beck (Cologne), further MPs and the BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN fraction, in Parliamentary Reports 16/13527, German Bundestag, 22 June 2009, ‘Oktoberfest-Attentat – Stasi-Notizen und Indizien betreffend Beteiligung der ‘Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann’ sowie Verbindungen zu ‘Gladio’

All efforts were essentially driven by the same motivating force – the wish to clarify controversial findings from investigations (such as the analysis of statements from witnesses, where the explosives came from and the involvement of the ‘Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann’). This scepticism was supported – among other things – by the publication of *Oktoberfest. Ein Attentat* by the journalist Ulrich Chaussy, in which he juxtaposes his research with the investigations carried out by the police and the law, and highlights unanswered questions and irregularities.⁷ One of the main points of criticism is the speed in which it was established that the attack was the work of a single individual despite several statements by witnesses to the contrary, non-attributable evidence and the self-incrimination of two former WSG members confirming their participation in the attack. In this respect, it is presumed that the Bundestag elections on 5 October 1980 had a decisive influence on how the Bavarian police investigators proceeded and on their findings. It can also be assumed that a successful, swift investigation would not only have suggested stability and security to the general public but would also have been aimed at relativising an error of judgement made earlier by the Bavarian Minister President and Federal Chancellor candidate, Franz Josef Strauss. Strauss had not only classified the danger from left-wing extremists as being considerably higher than from right-wing extremists but had also described the ban on the WSG in spring 1980 as an ‘over-reaction’.⁸

7 Chaussy, Ulrich, *Oktoberfest. Ein Attentat*, Darmstadt/Neuwied 1985

8 Heymann, Tobias von, op. cit., p. 215ff

Findings that revealed the involvement of organised right-wing extremists could well have had a negative influence on Strauss' candidature to become Federal Chancellor.

Doubts about the single bomber theory and Köhler's motives were also fuelled by articles published by the journalist Tobias von Heymann. Following the collapse of the Communist Eastern Bloc in the late 1980s, researchers once again began analysing the Oktoberfest bomb attack in a variety of different ways. This was largely due to being able to draw on documents that had been inaccessible up until that time. In this way, von Heymann was able to examine files from the East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi) or, more specifically, records related to the Munich bomb attack.⁹ He combed through more than 6,000 documents that alone makes it clear that the Stasi not only followed the investigations into the bombing very attentively but also considered the attack to be a politically motivated act by right-wing extremists. Von Heymann draws attention to one document in particular in which the Stasi refers to surveillance of the WSG by the intelligence services in the states of Bavaria, North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg. This surveillance, carried out under the code name 'Aktion Wandervogel', had already been initiated 22 hours before the explosion in Munich. Consequently, the Stasi assumed that West Germany state security possibly had knowledge of an impending attack.¹⁰

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 131ff

Apart from Stasi files, von Heymann analysed press reports published around the time of the attack. Here, he also found indications that Köhler may well have had accomplices as, one day after the Oktoberfest bomb attack, several daily newspapers in Munich had received an anonymous call from a woman. The wording was always the same: "We're from Bologna's right wing. We're against the Reds. We carried out a prank yesterday. We're going to carry on."¹¹ Just under two months before the Oktoberfest bombing a similar attack was perpetrated in Bologna, on 2 August 1980, in which 85 people were killed and more than 200 injured. This bomb attack was clearly attributed to an extreme right-wing network. The anonymous caller was never identified. The reference to the Bologna bombing and the proximity timewise to the Oktoberfest bomb attack made many people question the single bomber theory once again.

11 Ibid., p. 79

There is no mistaking that the results of Tobias von Heymann's research contributed to Dietrich's second petition to reopen the case in 2008. Apart from his demand to have the Stasi files taken into consideration, he also suggested comparing splinters from the Oktoberfest bomb with bombs used by extreme right-wing organisations in the 1970s and '80s. For Dietrich, another motive for reopening proceedings was to be found in new possibilities in the field of forensic research, such as DNA analyses, that had not been available in the 1980s. In answer to his request to have the evidence found at that time examined once again, the Federal Prosecutor's Office informed him that all exhibits had been destroyed in 1997. Why this was done remains unexplained. Generally speaking, evidence is only eliminated in cases that have resulted in binding rulings – namely in criminal procedures that have led to an acquittal or a conviction.

More than thirty years after the bomb attack, Dietrich's third petition was finally accepted in 2014. One decisive factor for this delayed success was the film *Der blinde Fleck* (Blind Spot; 2013) – a political thriller based on the bomb attack and the investigations carried out by the journalist Ulrich Chaussy. The resonance in the media was unexpected. The award-winning film struck a note among its audience that had not been reached before through any other media coverage.

New witnesses contacted [Chaussy](#) and [Dietrich](#) and their statements substantiated misgivings about the single perpetrator theory, confirming that they had seen Köhler just before the explosion in the company of others. However, it was not just these statements that forced the Public Prosecutor to take action. Findings that emerged from the [NSU trial](#) also contributed to this. The mistakes made during earlier investigations and the involvement of confidential informants in the NSU murder series sensibilized the securities service to review the controversial investigative results. In addition, the BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN and DIE LINKE factions in the German Bundestag jointly filed a suit against the Federal Constitutional Court. It was aimed at shedding light on how much information the confidential informants in the intelligence service had had about the planned Oktoberfest bomb attack. The case for a general right to information was partly granted. Referring to the need to protect confidential informants, their personal rights and the good of the state, inquiries into the informants' role, however, continued to be turned down.

In December 2014, the Federal Prosecutor's Office finally resumed its investigations. Together with the 'Soko 26. September', set up especially for this purpose by the Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigations, files comprising more than 300,000 pages were reviewed, including those from the secret service that had previously been held under lock and key.

More than 1000 people were questioned and 770 old and new leads taken up. After five-and-a-half -years, investigations were halted in July 2020 and the official number of victims raised from 224 to 234. Despite extensive investigative work, it had not been possible either to bring any possible accomplices to justice or to clarify the origin of the explosives. However, unlike investigations in the 1980s, the Public Prosecutor no longer categorised the bomb attack as non-political but as a right-wing extremist motivated act instead.

Ulrich Chaussy, a freelance journalist for the Bayerischer Rundfunk broadcasting company, and the lawyer Werner Dietrich challenged the results of investigations on the Oktoberfest bomb attack for more than thirty years. For both, the search for truth became a central issue, in which Dietrich invested considerable time and money, far beyond the terms of his mandate. It is thanks to their perseverance that the case was re-opened. In 2015 both were awarded the Krenkl Prize for their unrelenting commitment by the Munich South division of the SPD. In addition, Ulrich Chaussy and Werner Dietrich were awarded the Bundesverdienstkreuz (Federal Cross of Merit, 1st Class) in 2023.

From 2013 to 2018, the main trial against five individuals accused and convicted of being part of or supporting the right-wing terrorist group 'Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund' (National Socialist Underground; NSU) took place in Munich. Between 2000 and 2006, the NSU murdered nine people for racist motives as well as a policewoman, attempted numerous other murders, and committed bomb attacks and robberies. In 2011, the right-wing terrorist group exposed itself. The authorities had made serious mistakes in their investigations into previous crimes. They had ruled out right-wing motives and, influenced by structural racism, had concentrated on organised crime instead. The media landscape mostly accepted this assessment uncritically. Information from relatives and those affected as to the identities of the right-wing extremist perpetrators had been ignored. Society and politicians reacted to the NSU's self-exposure with shock and outrage at the serious investigative blunders and the involvement of the security forces. A frequent accusation was that the authorities were blind 'in their right eye'. Parliamentary committees of inquiry at federal and state levels confirmed massive failures on the part of the authorities and recommended reforms in the police and secret services.

The Oktoberfest Bomb Attack in the Collective Consciousness

Four days after the bombing, on 30 September 1980, the city mourned the victims of the attack. At an official memorial service in the Old City Hall, relatives came together with members of the German parliament, representatives of the church and other dignitaries to remember the dead and the injured. In his address, the mayor of Munich at that time, Erich Kiesl, called the memorial service an act of solidarity with the injured and bereaved while, at the same time, making an appeal to the public. He emphasised that violence – irrespective of whether motivated by left or right-wing sympathies – always targets society as a whole. He called on people to show greater political vigilance and civil courage: "We must fight any belief that encourages violence, preaches it, condones it, tolerates or plays it down."¹² The people of the City of Munich heeded this summons on 30 September 1980 by taking part in a wide variety of public vigils and memorial events on that day.¹³ Since the bomb attack, the 'DGB-JUGEND München' (German Trade Union youth association) has organised a rally with a wreath-laying ceremony every year on the anniversary

12 Landeshauptstadt München (ed.), *26. September 1980. Dokumentation zum 5. Jahrestag des Bombenanschlages auf dem Oktoberfest in München*, Munich 1985, p. 18

13 Among other events, a commemorative torchlight procession took place organised by the Association of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime and the Young Democrats and Young Socialists in Munich, an ecumenical service of worship, a DGB rally with a minute's silence, and a wreath-laying ceremony.



Memorial service at the scene of the bomb attack, 26 September 1981

of the bombing to commemorate the victims and keep critical discourse on the attack alive. The initial outpouring of sympathy from the people of Munich was, however, to subside quickly.

To uphold the memory of the victims of the attack in the collective consciousness, the City of Munich commissioned a commemorative column in 1981 to be erected at the main entrance to the Oktoberfest. However, even after being remodelled several times, with the addition of a flower-bed, for instance, in 1985, the column on the commemorative site was barely obvious. Millions of visitors simply walked past it without even noticing it, due to the sheer size of the festival ground and the memorial's inconspicuous design. Rubbish was often dumped around it or else it was misused as a urinal. To draw greater attention to the memorial site and lend it more dignity, as well as protect it from being violated, the memorial was remodelled once again in 2008. The bronze stele designed by Friedrich Koller in 1981 was expanded by the same sculptor to include a perforated, semi-circular steel wall that was intended to symbolise the force of the detonation. According to the artist, the wall is to be seen as a metaphor for protection and democracy that – as the holes imply – can also be violated. In addition, thirteen steel splinters have been set in the ground, standing for those who were killed in the bomb attack. At the initiative of relatives, the names of these victims were added to the column in 1987.

In the light of the debate concerning the culture of remembrance, it has emerged that the Oktoberfest bomb attack is often confused with the Munich Massacre against the Israeli Olympic team in 1972 in Munich.¹⁴ When seen in this light, it becomes clear how important initiatives are, such as the re-design of the memorial and the annual commemorative event, as well as publications and artistic takings on this theme, in order to keep the memory of what happened alive in the collective consciousness.¹⁵



Anti-fascist vigil, 26 September 2000

14 cf. Kienast, Moritz, *Erinnerung an das Oktoberfest-Attentat vom 26. September 1980*, Master's dissertation, Historicum, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich 2015

15 These include, among others, the film: *Der blinde Fleck* by Daniel Harrich (2013) and the play directed by Christiane Mudra *Wir waren nie weg – die Blaupause* from 2015



WANDEN AN
DIE ODER DER
SCHWARTZ
VON 1933-1945

ZUM GEDENKEN AN
DIE OPIER DES
BOMBENANSCIIAGES
VOM 26.9.1980

IGNAZ PLATZER
ILONA PLATZER
ANGELA SCHUTTRIGKEIT
ERROL VERE-HODGE
ERNST VESTNER
BEATE WERNER

“Time heals no wounds” – The Consequences for Victims and their Families

“Time heals no wounds” were the words of a mother whose son was killed in the bomb attack. Like several others, she agreed to be interviewed for this brochure. Her statement is exemplary for the suffering of all those who were injured in the attack or lost friends and relatives.

Forty years after the bomb attack many people are still suffering from severe injuries that have proven impossible to heal completely despite long hospital stays, countless operations and extended convalescence periods. In the majority of cases these injuries have led to impaired mobility that affects the daily routine of the victims. Several people interviewed have had to change their lives completely as a result of their physical and psychological injuries. This can be seen in everyday situations in particular. For some, the use of public transport, for example, requires considerable physical exertion, as getting to a bus stop alone, or standing for a long time, are extremely painful.



However, it is not just physical impairments that have affected the quality of people's lives. Whereas today crisis intervention and psychological support for traumatised victims of dramatic events is more or less taken for granted, such methods of treatment had not yet become routine at the beginning of the 1980s. The survivors of the bomb attack and their relatives were largely left to their own devices in coming to terms with what they had been through. A large number still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders to this day. In the course of conversations, it became clear that, since the attack, many avoid large crowds and react particularly sensitively to loud bangs. They also desist from attending the annual commemorative event as being at the scene of the bombing and thoughts of the Oktoberfest bring back horrific and painful memories of the attack.

An additional burden to the physical and psychological injuries they suffered is, many survivors feel, the way their medical needs were treated even though these were a direct result of the bomb attack. In the course of the first year after the attack, those who were injured received financial support that, as their recovery progressed, was reduced or stopped altogether. Those injured had to meet the cost of further essential rehabilitation measures or psychological treatment themselves and still have to face lengthy bureaucratic procedures.

Many survivors emphasised the readiness of the people of Munich to help immediately after the bomb attack, as well as the commitment shown by individual organisations, such as the 'Weisser Ring' that provides support for crime victims and their families. The injured received donations, presents and were visited in hospital and some still draw on this positive experience to the day.

For decades survivors did not receive adequate material compensation that took their suffering into consideration. It was only when the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office reclassified the attack as a right-wing extremist act in July 2020 that survivors were given the prospect of an appropriate indemnity.

Commemorative Research and Contemporary Witness Project of the Kulturreferat München (Department of Arts and Culture, Munich)

In 2015, the City of Munich initiated a research project on the Oktoberfest bomb attack. The original aim, namely to document the biographies of those who survived, evolved into a communal project to make the attack and its aftermath more visible in the city. Talks brought many poignant stories to light and, most notably, just how much support the survivors of the attack need to this day. In 2018, the city council, therefore, approved to provide financial aid in order to support the survivors' specific injury-related needs. In 2020/2021, following the classification of the attack as a right-wing extremist act, further solidarity payments were made by the Federal Republic of Germany, the Free State of Bavaria and the state capital Munich.

The scope of the research project increased continuously from 2015 onwards as many of the survivors expressed the wish to be able to communicate with one another and to have the possibility of co-determining the city's commemorative work. For these reasons, the Department of Arts and Culture organised regular meetings at which survivors could exchange views with one another and the research project team about a worthy form of commemoration. The wish

formulated during these meetings for a visible memorial in the city centre led first of all to the joint realisation of a commemorative plaque in the New City Hall in 2018.

Fired by the success of this cooperation and the desire to provide a full explanation of the bomb attack, as well as wanting the stories behind the fates of each individual to be an integral part of the public conscience, work on the creation of a documentation site took place from 2018 onwards. Survivors were actively involved in both the decision process for the design as well as its execution. To mark the 40th anniversary in September 2020, the 'Oktoberfest Bomb Attack Documentation' was opened. Situated next to the existing work of art by Friedrich Koller, the exhibition gives visitors the possibility of informing themselves at the entrance to the Theresienwiese festival site about what happened on 26 September 1980 and about the impact of the attack from a survivors' perspective. Thanks to such a new level of visibility – the documentary exhibition on the site, the increased presence of survivors at the annual commemorative event and in media reports – and the legal re-classification of the crime, on a national level, as a right-wing extremist attack, it has been increasingly possible to raise social awareness as to what happened. In the meantime, politically motivated attacks will be viewed more closely as part of the history of both Munich and Germany.



Unveiling of the memorial plaque at Munich City Hall on 4 September 2018 by the Mayor Dieter Reiter and Dimitrios Lagkadinou, representing the survivors and victims of the attack. "Their unheeded suffering admonishes us to care. The deeds of right-wing extremists call for vigilance. Munich remembers the victims of the Oktoberfest Bomb Attack on 26 September 1980 and all those affected by it."

Decades of social repression have strengthened the survivors' resolve to continue fighting for clarification, understanding and a diverse culture of remembrance for the future. In the light of this, survivors regularly speak publicly about their experiences and appeal for greater social vigilance with regard to right-wing extremist movements. In autumn 2023, the research project group travelled to Berlin at the invitation of the President of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and the then Commissioner for the Victims of Domestic Terrorist Activities, Pascal Kober. In memorable discussions, they talked about fates suffered and advocated unbureaucratic and long-term support for all victims of politically motivated violence.

Dealing with the Oktoberfest bomb attack is the concern of society as a whole, something that the City of Munich acknowledges. The Kulturreferat (Department of Arts and Culture) is to continue this Commemorative Research and Contemporary Witness Project as countless reports by survivors, first responders and eye-witnesses have not yet been related or documented.

If you have a contribution to make or have questions related to the project, please contact the Department of Arts and Culture in Munich (Department of Public History), e-mail: public-history@muenchen.de; tel.: 089 233-24435.



The permanent exhibition entitled 'Oktoberfest Bomb Attack Documentation' on the Theresienwiese provides information about the attack. It commemorates the victims, gives survivors and relatives as well as eye-witnesses a voice and traces society's response to the attack up to the present day.

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