

Helsinki bomb tragedy points to social tensions in Finland

By Steve James
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A nineteen-year-old student killed himself and six passers-by, including a seven-year-old child, with a shrapnel bomb on October 11 near the Finnish capital, Helsinki.

The blast, which injured 80 others, many very seriously, occurred just after the conclusion of a children's clown show. Around 2,000 people were in the busy Myyrmanni shopping mall in the Myyrmaki suburb of Vantaa, north of Helsinki. Several hundred metres of the mall were wrecked by the explosion, described as the worst civilian disaster in Helsinki since World War II.

Finnish police quickly identified Petri Erkki Tapio Gerdt as the bomber. Gerdt lived with his parents and had just started studying chemistry at the local Espoo-Vantaa Institute of Technology. No motive has been suggested, nor is it known whether this was a suicide bombing or an attack that went wrong.

Press reports in *Helsingin Sanomat* have concentrated on a few lines left by an "RC", thought to have been Gerdt, on an internet bulletin board, "Forum for Home Chemistry" for amateur explosives enthusiasts. RC was apparently quite knowledgeable and had recently raised "conflicts with explosives/officials". He also recounted a dream in which he was "floating" away from a blast site. RC used the signature "I ain't a killer but don't push me" from a rap song, in his postings. He had also described how he carried out a test explosion with an unstable substance called HMTD.

The bomb itself used unusual non-military explosives. A seventeen-year-old who ran the bulletin board was arrested, and is reportedly being questioned as to whether he gave Gerdt technical help. Another of Gerdt's friends told police that he had been talking about exploding a bomb in a public place for a year. Surveillance cameras suggested that Gerdt had hung around the mall for 20 minutes before the explosion.

As soon as it was clear the attacker was acting alone, the Finnish authorities moved to brush the events to one side. Interior Minister Ville Itala told reporters that once organised terrorism had been discounted, "The main thing is that the matter has been sorted out... Life goes on. There is

no cause for panic."

Itala added, "I don't know what measures we could take to stop such actions, when a solitary person decides quite without warning to act like this."

The Social Democrats seized the opportunity to intensify efforts to censor Internet news groups, bulletin boards and websites. A bill already going through parliament is seeking to extend restrictions on freedom of speech on the Internet. Itala told parliament that in future orders could be issued to remove messages, news postings and web pages. Every online publication would need to name an editor who could be held responsible for postings on message boards they operated. The bill is due to become law next autumn.

Explanations for Gerdt's actions cannot be found in the huge expansion of information and discussion on every conceivable topic which the Internet makes easy. Rather one has to examine the society in which Gerdt grew up and ask why a relatively privileged young man should have such contempt for his own and others' lives.

Descriptions of Gerdt are sparse, but he seems to have been a quiet young man from a middle class family. He played basketball and from an early age had a fascination with fireworks and explosives. He tended to sit at the back of the class in school. He had no known political convictions and was supposed to be sitting a mathematics test three days after he blew himself up. A picture of him shows a tall serious looking youth, dressed in black with short hair.

On the face of it, Vantaa and Helsinki are not unpleasant areas in which to grow up. Helsinki is the fastest growing of European capital cities and Helsinki airport, near Vantaa, is opening another runway. Vantaa is relatively well catered for in terms of leisure, housing, educational and social facilities. The town itself has been in existence for many centuries, but has expanded rapidly as the logistics centre of Finnish transport infrastructure. As an investment hub drawing hi-tech companies in from around the world, Vantaa could expect to offer many of its youth the chance of an interesting career. The Espoo Vantaa Institute of Technology Gerdt attended is orienting to providing a

skilled professional and managerial workforce for global industries drawn to the area. The shopping mall Gerdt wrecked is one of the largest in Finland.

Trawl the *Helsingin Sanomat* archives, however, and one finds a different picture. Numerous partial indicators emerge of social unease and of the impact of social and political stresses, particularly on young people. Although living standards in Finland remain relatively high in comparison with much of Europe, the decade during which Gerdt came to adulthood has been one of growing instability, inequality and austerity policies implemented by the Social Democrats. Economic slump bound up with the collapse in the Soviet Union in 1991 threw many Finns out of work, and forced a reorientation of the economy towards the European Union, which Finland joined in 1995.

So successful has Finnish capital been in taking advantage of this, particularly the hi-tech boom, that in successive years the Finnish economy has been deemed to be amongst the most competitive in the world, second only to the United States. Mobile phone producer Nokia embodies Finnish corporate success. The most successful mobile phone company in the world has spawned thousands of share owning "Nokia millionaires," while producing a generation of professional workers for whom stress and insecurity are the norm. Regional tensions have been exacerbated, with the Helsinki region far outstripping outlying areas in wage levels and investment.

In the last two years, while Nokia has better survived the implosion of the global telecoms bubble than many of its rivals, under the impact of the global economic slowdown 56 percent of Finns now expect unemployment to increase, up from 15 percent a year ago. Unemployment presently stands at 8-9 percent. A growth in part-time work has dramatically increased fears of economic insecurity, particularly amongst younger workers and professionals whose lifestyle expectations have been built during the share boom. More broadly, 43 percent of Finns fear an increase in international conflicts and discord, while only three percent expect peaceful coexistence between nations. In short Finland is a society where unease is the norm and the high premium placed on academic success can at least partially account for instances of disturbed and occasionally even sociopathic behaviour amongst children and adolescents.

The Social Democrats' policies are ensuring that support services for people under mental stress are continually being eroded. A school survey earlier this year reported that 80 percent of school principals stated that their work was hampered by domestic problems suffered by their children. Half of schools have no means of dealing with mentally unstable or violent children. Half complain of a shortage of child psychologists. One in three schools are short of

teachers. One head teacher told the survey that schools are forced to function as police stations, health centres, social affairs and mental health offices, all at the same time.

Children and adolescents in need of psychiatric care sometimes are forced to wait more than a year for attention. In Helsinki the waiting time is four months on account of a shortage of psychiatrists. In the whole of Finland, a country with a population of 5.2 million, there are only 100 psychiatrists who specialise in adolescents. Due to the degeneration of child support and counselling services caused by spending cuts during the 1990s, the number of children taken into custody increased from 9,000 to 13,000 between 1991 and 2000. Special teaching and remedial services have been curtailed.

The government is intent on further reducing public spending. The finance minister called for one billion euros to be cut from social spending earlier this year. The City of Helsinki is intent on closing libraries, hospitals, day care centres and kindergartens to save 7.1 million euros, while the education department intends to save 24 million euros this year.

Calls to mental health crisis lines provided by voluntary and religious groups have doubled in five years. Volunteers on the lines attribute this directly to the run down of public psychiatry. Staff also report increasing numbers of young people and young adults struggling to cope. Demand for psychiatric help from the Finnish Student Health Service has risen by 60 percent in ten years, while the use of antidepressants among young people has gone up 36 percent over the same period.

It is not known whether Gerdt asked for help or even considered himself in need of assistance. But the lack of an adequate response from the working class to the dramatic changes in the 1990s, along with the absence among broad social layers of any coherent framework within which to understand the origins of the gigantic and accelerating changes in all areas of social and political life, cannot but produce extreme mental stress and apparently incomprehensible acts. Moreover, in an era of resurgent imperialist militarism, when the most savage violence visited on innocents is shrugged off as collateral damage, how does this refract itself in the psychology of a disturbed individual like Gerdt?

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