

Paul Greengrass's *22 July*: Neo-fascist mass murder in Norway

By Joanne Laurier
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Written, directed and produced by Paul Greengrass

The Netflix fiction feature *22 July*, written, directed and produced by veteran British filmmaker Paul Greengrass, recreates the horrific massacre in Norway on July 22, 2011, during which 77 people were killed in a neo-fascist terrorist attack. The English-language movie features an all-Norwegian cast and crew.

Greengrass specializes in dramatizing traumatic episodes where masses of people undergo violent attack, either by government forces or terrorists. He is perhaps best known for his 2002 docudrama, *Bloody Sunday*, about the 1972 shooting of 13 unarmed civil rights demonstrators by British soldiers in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. *Omagh* (2004), a television film he co-produced and co-wrote, dealt with the 1998 bombing carried out in Northern Ireland by the Real Irish Republican Army, which killed 29 people.

Greengrass also directed *The Murder of Stephen Lawrence*, a 1999 television film exposing police racism and brutality. More recently, he made *United 93* (2006), focused on the commandeering of one of the planes during the 9/11 attack, and *Captain Phillips* (2013), about the Somali pirate hijacking of a US cargo ship. He was also at the helm for three of the five loosely anti-CIA Bourne series, as well as the tepid *Green Zone* (2010), about the Iraq War.

22 July is a graphic depiction of the 2011 butchery. The movie opens as neo-Nazi terrorist Anders Breivik (Anders Danielsen Lie) is building explosives in a remote Norwegian farm house. In a carefully planned assault, he detonates a powerful bomb in the vicinity of government buildings in the center of Oslo, the country's capital. As officials move to protect Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg (Ola G. Furuseth) from possible attack and security forces concentrate on the bombing, Breivik coldly moves on to a second and far greater slaughter.

The target is Utøya island 20 miles northwest of Oslo, where a summer camp run by the youth section of Norway's ruling Labour Party is taking place. Among the scores of young people in attendance is Viljar Hanssen (Jonas Strand Gravli), a well-spoken teenager from Svalbard in the

country's far north, who proudly describes his home town as a mecca of multiculturalism.

Posing and outfitted as a police officer, Breivik invades the island with an arsenal of firearms, mowing down groups of unsuspecting youth, leaving piles of corpses in his wake. "You will die today," he screams, "Marxists, liberals, members of the elite." During the terrifying ordeal, Viljar is severely wounded. By the time Breivik is arrested, around one hour later, his murderous rampage leaves 77 dead, 69 of them youth, and more than 200 injured.

Once in police custody, the terrorist feels empowered to demand "a complete ban on immigration," explaining he is part of an army at war "to take back Europe." He specifically requests the services of liberal attorney Geir Lippestad (Jon Øigarden), who, while despising his client's politics, is obliged to provide him the best possible defense.

Meanwhile, Viljar, recovering from his devastating wounds, is pushing himself to extremes to develop the physical and emotional stamina needed to face his attacker as a witness for the prosecution. In this he is aided by his close friend Lara (Seda Witt), another survivor of the carnage and the daughter of refugees, who will also be a witness against Breivik.

Greengrass's film is effectively, skillfully done, and the performances by the Norwegian actors are spot-on. The filmmaker and presumably everyone involved in the production of *22 July* aim to sound the alarm about the rise of fascism. For this, they deserve congratulations. The re-emergence of the far right out of the conditions of capitalist crisis is one of the major political questions—and dangers—of our time, and few writers, directors and actors have treated it head-on.

Speaking at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, Greengrass argued: "This unprecedented shift to the far right is occurring today. It's right in front of our eyes. It's a problem across Europe and across North America. ... In 2011, that [Breivik's outlook] would've been considered outrageous as a worldview. Today it's entirely mainstream. His rhetoric, his worldview now, is

mainstream. That shows you how dramatic and ongoing this shift to the right, toward nativism, nationalism and all the rest of it [is].”

This is a critical point, and the director is clearly referring to the election of Donald Trump, as well as developments in Italy, Germany, France and elsewhere.

That’s all to the good, but Greengrass is much weaker—in the film and in his public comments—on how the threat represented by diseased elements such as Breivik and, more importantly, the right-wing forces who incite and manipulate them, can be combated.

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, for example, Greengrass expressed the conviction that his movie clarifies the way forward “because it shows how democracy can be fought for in crisis. And what are the ways you do it? Through political leadership, through the rule of law, and ultimately through young people articulating the values that they want to live by.”

In other words, the social democratic government of Stoltenberg and the Norwegian ruling class are his model for eradicating fascism. But the problems in Norway and Europe did not disappear with Breivik’s conviction and incarceration.

Greengrass believes that people of good will need to be more vigilant in regard to these right-wing forces: “We’re going to have to listen. Donald Trump doesn’t get elected, Brexit doesn’t happen unless we’re not listening. ... We’re going to have to listen to these voices and understand them, unwelcome though some of them may be, if we’re going to get out of this problem. And we’re going to have to contend with them, too. We’re going to have to beat them with better arguments.”

Extreme right-wing forces breed under conditions of economic and social decay and by the failure of the parties claiming to represent the working class to offer any way out of the situation.

Stoltenberg was the Labour Party prime minister of Norway from 2000 to 2001 and from 2005 to 2013 (before being appointed secretary general of NATO, the US-led military alliance). His government oversaw harsh attacks on the working class. It radically cut back the welfare state, privatized key public services and deliberately stirred up anti-immigrant sentiment. It was also implicated in the failure of the intelligence services to prevent Breivik’s murderous onslaught.

Today in Norway, the extreme-right Progress Party, of which Breivik was a member from 1997 to 2007, is part of a coalition government, able to come to power because of popular disillusionment with social democratic rule. The Labour Party, like social democratic parties everywhere, opened the door for the extreme right.

In *22 July*, Breivik is largely treated as a delusional crank who most probably acted alone. There is a reference to his 1,500-page manifesto (which he published online and sent to over 1,000 contacts just hours before carrying out the massacre). His lawyer interviews a leading right-wing extremist who, during the trial, essentially disassociates himself from Breivik, despite Breivik’s professed allegiance to him.

The movie ends with Breivik successfully isolated and a healthy democracy intact.

But as the WSWS wrote on July 26, 2011, just a few days after the mass murder: “Information which emerged in the immediate aftermath of Breivik’s attacks revealed extensive ties with known extremist groups, including the English Defence League (EDL). Breivik attended meetings in Britain with leading members of this organisation, and also claimed to have been the founding member of a group calling itself the Knights Templar in 2002. Included in this group were right-wing nationalists from across Europe and a convicted terrorist from Germany.

“Breivik appears to have been well financed and well organised. He leased a farm north of Oslo two years ago. According to Reuters, the farm is near a military base housing the 2,000-strong Telemark battalion. He posted an entry on his Internet diary commenting on the proximity.

‘It’s quite ironic,’ Breivik wrote, ‘being situated practically on top of the largest military base in the country. It would have saved me a lot of hassle if I could just ‘borrow’ a cup of sugar and 3kg of C4 (explosive) from my dear neighbour.’ ”

The makers of *22 July* close their eyes to these sobering social facts and it weakens the impact of their well-intentioned film.

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