

# In Germany's Twelve Tribes sect, cameras catch 'cold and systematic' child-beating



A documentary revealed the torture inflicted by a religious community on its young

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The little blond-haired boy is about four years old. He simpers as a middle aged woman drags him downstairs into a dimly-lit cellar and orders the child to bend over and touch the stone floor with his

hands. Another little boy watches as the woman pulls down the first boy's pants and then draws out a willow cane.

"Say you are tired!" commands the woman in an emotionless voice. The swoosh of the willow cane is audible as it strikes the screaming child's bottom three times. The little boy refuses to say he is tired so he is hit again and again – a total of ten times – until, in floods of tears, he finally says "I am tired."

Within the space of a few hours, six adults are filmed in the cellar and in an underground school central heating room beating six children with a total of 83 strokes of the cane. The graphic and disturbing scenes were shown on Germany's RTL television channel last night.

They were filmed by Wolfram Kuhnigk, an RTL journalist equipped with hidden video cameras and microphones, who infiltrated a 100-strong religious community run by the fundamentalist "Twelve Tribes" sect in Bavaria earlier this year. Kuhnigk claimed to be a lost soul to gain entry. "Seeing this systematic beatings made me want to weep, it made me think of my own two children," he said. He collected 50 beating scenes on camera.

The Twelve Tribes was formed in America over 40 years ago and has an estimated 3,000 members world wide.

The fundamentalist organisation, which lives in isolated self-sustaining communities, has branches outside the US in Britain, Germany, France, Spain, the Czech Republic, Australia, Argentina and Canada.

In the UK, the Twelve Tribes' website says it has been running a community near Honiton in Devon for nearly 15 years and has been "searching for and finding those who are not satisfied with their lives".

Its members consider the Old and New Testaments to be God's direct word. The sect says it openly believes in "spanking" disobedient children to "drive out the Devil". Its website insists: "We know that some people consider this aspect of our life controversial, but we have seen from experience that discipline keeps a child from becoming mean-spirited and disrespectful of authority."

The sect has also been accused of racism. "Multiculturalism increases murder, crime and prejudice," the movement said in a statement. Gene Spriggs, its founder, has claimed Martin Luther King was "filled with every evil spirit there is".

In Bavaria the sect has been investigated several times over the past decade following reports that its members beat children, which is illegal in Germany. Police and youth workers claimed each time that they had not found sufficient evidence to mount a prosecution.

However, Mr Kuhnigk's clandestinely obtained evidence prompted police and youth workers to raid two "Twelve Tribes" communities in Bavaria last Thursday. Forty children who had been living there were taken away at dawn and placed in foster homes amid suspicions that they had spent most of their lives being subjected to interminable abuse.

Kuhnigk's film strongly implies that they were. The evidence he collected at the sect's community in a former monastery near the village of Deiningen exposes a dark world in which children have no rights and are subjected to round-the-clock surveillance and persistent beatings for the most trivial offences.

Sven, a 19-year-old former Twelve Tribes member who ran away at the age of 14 recalls how he was beaten for imitating an aeroplane. In the hands of one of the sect's "educators", he was beaten for days at 2 o'clock in the morning because he kept wetting his bed. "They said I had lost control of myself", he says in an interview.

"I was told I would die if I tried to escape," he tells Kuhnigk, "I was a child who was not allowed to be a child," he added.

The film shows how children are made to get up at 5am and stand through an hour-long prayer session. They are obliged to labour with adults in the community's farm plots and workshops. They attend the community's own strictly religious schools. "It's normal to be beaten every day," said Christian, another former member who escaped five years ago.

The film also shows disturbing images of a baby boy being forcefully gripped by the back of the head in a practice referred to by sect members as "restraining."

Alfred Kanth, a spokesman for the Bavarian youth welfare service described the film as shocking. "We never had proof that they do this. It is terrible, they preach peace but they beat their children," he told RTL. Sabine Riede, an official from Cologne who monitors the activities of religious sects agreed that the beatings amounted to torture. "Sometimes parents wallop a child, but this is different, it is cold and systematic," she said.

The Twelve Tribes frequently claims it is the victim of systematic persecution by the authorities. Similar allegations at a Vermont community prompted the police to seize 112 children in a raid in 1984. However, no charges were brought and the children were released.

Kuhnigk's film ends with the police raid on the Bavarian Twelve Tribes community and the attempts by two elderly and bearded male sect members to counter the allegations that they beat children. "We do not abuse our children," insisted one repeatedly. He appeared unwilling to respond directly to the allegations of child beating. Bavarian state prosecutors said they were continuing their investigation into the sect's activities.