

Gunmen Recalled as Outcasts

By Marc Fisher

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The shooters who turned Columbine High School into an unspeakable landscape of carnage yesterday were members of a small clique of outcasts who always wore black trench coats and spent their entire adolescence deep inside the morose subculture of Gothic fantasy, their fellow students said.

Students at the Colorado school said the gunmen, whom police say may have turned their weapons on themselves after killing as many as 25 of their schoolmates and teachers, were a constant target of derision for at least four years.

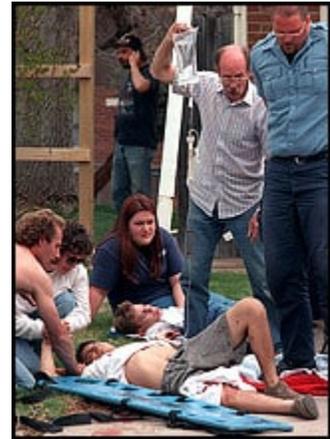
"They're basically outcasts, Gothic people," said Peter Maher, a junior who had a confrontation last July 4 with the shooters and several of their fellow members of the "Trench Coat Mafia," the black-clad teenagers' name for their clique. "They're into anarchy. They're white supremacists and they're into Nostradamus stuff and Doomsday."

Several students said the shooters – whose names were withheld by police but who are believed to have graduated from Columbine last year – were deeply into death – talking, reading and dreaming about it.

Black trench coats are a consistent theme in the Gothic subculture that has attracted many teenagers to the poetry, music and costumes of a scene that ranges from benign fantasy to violent reality.

Inspired by fantasy games such as Dungeons and Dragons, Gothic has become a fascination of many American high schoolers, some of whom simply dress and paint their fingernails black while others immerse themselves in a pseudo-medieval world of dark images.

On Web sites featuring poetry called "The Written Work of the Trenchcoat" and in political tracts and other elements of the conspiratorial imagination, trench coats serve as a symbol for things from Hitler and the Nazis to mass murder to suicidal fantasies. Yesterday was Hitler's birthday, an occasion for demonstrations, mock funerals and other macabre commemorations among both neo-Nazis and parts of the Gothic scene.



Two boys lay wounded from the shooting near Columbine High School. Students said the two suspects always wore black trenchcoats to school and were immersed in Gothic subculture.

(AP Photo/The Denver Rocky Mountain News, George Kochanec)

When the young men started shooting yesterday, tenth-grader Mindy Pollock was in the school parking lot. She saw two shooters firing their guns repeatedly, and she watched as her fellow students dropped to the pavement.

She said she couldn't believe it was real, especially since she had once before seen this same boy pull a gun on some of her friends. "The one with the handgun today pulled a shotgun on my friends once. He said he was sick of being made fun of," she said. "He said, 'I'll shoot you, I'll shoot you.'" Pollock said her friends tried to calm the boy and then ran from him.

Maher and two of his friends were at a fireworks stand in Littleton July 4 when the Trench Coat Mafia boys approached them and said they had a shotgun. Maher and his friends saw no gun, but the trench coat boys did pull knives and tried to fight with the others. Maher said he and his friends had had no previous contact with the boys in black.

"We didn't want to fight, so we talked to them for a while and then we just got out of there," Maher said.

Several students described the Trench Coat Mafia members in similar terms: They wore their trench coats every day, no matter the weather, even in class. Under the coats, they dressed in black from head to toe – military berets, T-shirts, jeans, combat boots. Red shoelaces and the occasional Confederate flag patch were the only departure from the dark theme.

"They were kind of the freaks of the school," said Kendra Curry, a senior.

Pollock and other students described the Trench Coat Mafia as a group of perhaps six to ten students who were constantly being ribbed by the school's athletes and other, more popular cliques.

"The athletes and stuff are really popular," Pollock said. "They make fun of me all the time because I wear bell-bottoms and I'm a little hippy girl. And they'd make fun of the Trench Coat Mafia. They'd say, 'White trash,' and 'Why don't you comb your hair?' and 'Are you Gothic, man?' and 'You need some new clothes.' Just stupid teenage stuff."

Maher, too, said athletes at Columbine routinely teased the trench-coated students, muttering "Goth" every time they passed one another in the hallways.

Students said the Gothic look appeals only to a tiny minority of young people in the Denver suburb. "They kind of stay by themselves," said junior Evan Vitale. "They

always have the neo-Nazi look, so we were talking about them and Hitler's birthday even before the shooting started. Everybody knew it was Hitler's birthday."

On one such Web site, a skeleton dances over a raging inferno and the words "The Trenchcoat." Below, a poem called "Death of a Jester" includes these lines:

"There will be no performance today/There will be no curtain call/He can no longer perform for you/So witness the grandest spectacle of all/It's a one night engagement/So make your way to the front row/It's the death of a jester/It's one dead man's show.

"There are no mourners today/Only spectators at the scene/Relishing in this bizarre event . . . /He died from no acclaim/I heard his dying words/As his final breath he gave/He wanted to be taken seriously/Now he's taken to the grave."