Germany: Neo-Nazi attack on Green Party MP

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On September 20, two days before German national elections, parliamentary deputy Hans-Christian Ströbele was attacked in Berlin by a Neo-Nazi thug. Ströbele, 63, is a founding member of the Green Party. In his profession as a lawyer, he came to prominence in the 1970s for his legal defence of members of the terrorist Red Army Fraction. He is widely known as a left-wing critic of the Green Party leadership because he argued against the war policies of the German government coalition (Social Democrats-Greens) in Kosovo in 1998 and voted against the deployment of German troops in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001.

The attack took place near the Berlin subway station Warschauer Straße in Ströbele's constituency of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg-Prenzlauer Berg East. Ströbele was in the process of handing out election leaflets at 7.30 a.m. when he was struck without warning by his assailant. According to Ströbele's election manager Dietmar Lingemann, the attacker "came from behind and struck him on the back of the head with a telescopic cosh, a so-called blackjack." Such weapons are potentially deadly and capable of breaking the neck. The blow seems not to have been well-aimed and Ströbele came away with a concussion.

Later Ströbele said that he thought initially he had been hit by a lorry. He was able to collect himself sufficiently to pursue the attacker, who was shortly afterwards grabbed by building workers and then taken into custody by a police unit called to the scene.

Later the police reported that the attacker was a leading neo-Nazi, and his name was given as "Bendix J. W." The details cited about his record leave no doubt that he is a well-known figure by the name of Wendt. In earlier police reports Wendt had been identified as a symbolic figure with a long record of criminal activity in the most militant neo-Nazi groups. He was described as "one of the most dangerous right-wing extremists" who would frequently operate under the banner of the "White Aryan Resistance".

Wendt, who is from the town of Wandlitz north of Berlin (the home of many of the most prominent figures in East Germany's former Stalinist regime), had already come to the attention of the East German authorities as a member of the fascist "Vandals" group. He was repeatedly arrested in the 1990s for politically motivated criminal activities and currently a number of cases are pending against him, including those involving grievous bodily harm, disturbance of the peace and the public display of Nazi symbols, which is forbidden by German law.

The 35-year-old Wendt was a founding member of the neo-Nazi "National Alternative" (NA), which has since been banned. He is regarded as an expert on weapons and explosives by those active in circles on the extreme right. According to a former associate who dropped out of the Nazi scene, Wendt was active as a "military trainer" for the NA and employed live ammunition in exercises. (This is highly unusual in Germany, where laws regulating possession of firearms are much more restrictive than, for example, in the US.)

In October 1995 Wendt was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in jail for offences against the law governing the control of weapons of war. He had led the Austrian neo-Nazi Peter Binder to a former Russian garrison where the latter extracted explosives from tank mines.

In 1995 Wendt incriminated Binder at the so-called letter bomb trial in Vienna. Binder and an accomplice were accused of organising a series of letter bomb attacks in December 1993 in which several people were seriously injured. The victims included the social democratic mayor of Vienna, Helmut Zilk, whose left hand was blown apart by a letter bomb. Binder denied the attacks but admitted to his fascist beliefs. The trial made clear that there were close links between neo-fascist organisations in Germany and Austria.

In addition Wendt is alleged to have trained the neo-Nazi Kay Diesner, who in 1997 burst into a Berlin bookshop run by PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) member Klaus Baltruschat, shooting him in the stomach with a pump action shotgun. In the police hunt following the incident, Diesner also shot and killed a policeman. Since the attack Klaus Baltruschat remains seriously disabled.

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Despite this background, on the very same day of the attack—and as Ströbele was still being treated in hospital—the committing magistrate decided to release Wendt. While acknowledging that there were sufficient grounds for keeping Wendt in custody, he refrained from enforcing the arrest. The official of the Berlin legal authority in charge, Christoph Flügge, (SPD—German Social Democratic Party) justified this decision with the argument that the assailant had a permanent domicile and a job, and therefore there existed no danger of flight or his going into hiding. Flügge told the press: "If these dangers do not exist, pre-trial detention can be imposed only in very severe cases, for example suspected murder."

Initially the police proceeded with their investigations on the basis of attempted murder, but because there was supposedly no direct witness to the attack, they are now proceeding against Wendt with a charge of grievous bodily harm.

Most press reports have fallen into line and played down the incident. The established political parties have so far refrained from posing any further questions. Their spokesmen have issued short statements expressing outrage at the attack, sent their best wishes for Ströbele's recovery and proceeded to carry on as usual. There was notably little reporting, let alone investigating, by the media.

But the circumstance of the attack raise a number of very serious issues.

The information table set up Friday morning in Warschauer Straße had not been publicly announced beforehand and those taking part had agreed the action at the last minute. Nevertheless the identities of the attacker and the victim, as well as the time of the attack, speak against the claim by the police that the neo-Nazi spontaneously took advantage of the occasion. According to witnesses, Wendt had been waiting at a corner for more than half an hour before he struck. It is strange enough that a neo-Nazi with a European reputation, armed with a cosh, lurks in an area of Berlin which is known as a centre for left-wing radicals in the early hours of the morning—and then happens to run into a prominent left-wing deputy. There are too many factors at work for the event to be dismissed as accidental.

Officials of the Green Party in Ströbele's constituency told the *World Socialist Web Site* about their suspicion that the attacker might have planned to attack the SPD candidate, Andreas Matthae, who had officially announced an information table near the subway station for 10 a.m. However, in comparison to Ströbele, Matthae is a lesser known figure, although he too is regarded as "left" for his advocacy of a union between the SPD and PDS.

This latest fascist attack is particularly alarming against the background of proven collaboration between neo-Nazi groups in Germany and the country's intelligence services. Over the past few years, material has come to light demonstrating the closeness of these links. As a member of the Parliamentary Control Committee for the secret services, Hans-Christian Ströbele has repeatedly criticised and called for more information to be made available to deputies regarding the activities of the German intelligence forces and the Interior Ministry in extreme-right circles.

Last February he accused German Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD) of providing inadequate information regarding agents of the intelligence services who were working actively inside one of Germany's biggest fascist organisations—the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). The German government has been seeking to ban the organisation for some time but, in the course of investigations, has run into problems as it became clear that leading levels of the party were riddled with government agents—for example, Udo Holtmann, the former chairman of the NPD for the state of North-Rhine Westphalia.

In August Ströbele issued press statements calling for the government to inform the Parliamentary Control Commission of the activities of a further suspected government agent, Mirko H., who was responsible for producing a CD with blatantly racist lyrics which also called for the murder of parliamentary deputies: "...storm the Reichstag (German parliament), set it in flames, prepare the gallows for the pack of rats". According to an August 14 press statement from Ströbele's office, "This raises the question—in a similar fashion to the procedure to ban the NPD—who is responsible for these Nazi activities and whether the state could not easily have stopped, or must stop, such calls for murder."

The same question is raised by the attempt on Hans-Christian Ströbele's life. The question must by asked whether there are any connections between Wendt, or the circles Wendt moves in, and the intelligence forces which could help clarify the anomalies surrounding the attack.

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