

Germany: The Lübeck arson attack and the Zwickau neo-Nazi terrorist cell

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The Zwickau neo-Nazis—since 2000, responsible for at least nine cold-blooded killings of Greek and Turkish-born small business owners, several bombings, bank robberies and the murder of a policewoman from Thuringia—committed their crimes under the noses of police and intelligence agencies.

The precise links that existed between the neo-Nazi killers Uwe Mundlos, Uwe Böhnhardt and Beate Zschäpe and the state authorities remain unclear. *Der Spiegel* has reported evidence that one or more members of the trio might have been working for the secret service. The intelligence agency denies any collaboration with the killers.

What is certain is that before they went underground, the three were being watched by the security authorities and that they maintained contact with undercover agents in the neo-Nazi scene who were highly paid for their services.

It is not the first time that right-wing killers have enjoyed the protection of the state. A particularly well-documented case is the arson attack on a refugee hostel in Lübeck in January 1996.

There were several attacks on foreigners' hostels in Germany in the early 1990s. On November 23, 1992 in Mölln, two girls (aged 14 and 10) and their 51-year-old grandmother were killed and nine people seriously injured. On May 29, 1993 in Solingen, five people died in an attack and 17 suffered injuries, some life-threatening. In both cases, the right-wing perpetrators were identified and convicted. The Solingen arsonists had regularly visited a martial arts club run by a secret service informant.

On the night of June 5, 1993, the house of a Turkish family in Hattingen burned down. An arson attack was immediately suspected. A demonstration and donations to the family testified to the spontaneous solidarity with the victims. But a little later, police and prosecutors alleged that the family had set their own house on fire. On the basis of completely outrageous claims, the mother was charged with arson and giving false information about a criminal act. In 1996, she was acquitted by a court in Bochum.

During this period there were a number of vicious attacks

by neo-Nazis on immigrants, homeless and disabled persons, and social dissidents, often with fatal consequences. Over 150 people have been killed by the extreme right since German reunification in 1990.

The Lübeck arson attack on a refugee shelter on the night of January 18, 1996 was a high point of these atrocities. Throughout the country, outrage over attacks by right-wing extremists had been growing. In 1995, initiatives were taken to post night guards in front of refugee homes to protect them against arson attacks. On the morning of the 18th, the whole country was discussing the attack in Lübeck, in which ten people died and 38 were injured, some seriously.

It soon became known that three young men from neighbouring Grevesmühlen—one of whom had a right-wing background—were stopped by a nearby police patrol at about the time of the crime. Hair samples of the men showed scorching of the eyelashes and eyebrows. A forensic medical report said the traces of fire were “fresh,” meaning “no more than 24 hours old.” The men from Grevesmühlen were unable to provide a credible explanation for the scorching.

A roommate of one of the three suspects told police that his roommate had informed him two weeks before “that he wants to set fire to something in Lübeck.” A girlfriend said the same person had told her the next morning that “there was someone who was still burning down on the ground by the fire there.” The student, Sylvio Amoussou, a refugee from Togo, burned to death on the porch of the hostel.

The three men from Grevesmühlen were remanded in custody, along with Dirk Tschentgen, who, according to the testimony of the three, was with them on the night of the crime and who also had burn marks on his face. It seemed only a matter of time before the crime would be completely solved.

In the event, the case turned into a farce. As with the three Zwickau killers, the Lübeck case was characterised by errors and incompetence, if not outright sabotage, by the security authorities.

On the morning of January 19, something happened that no one had expected. The four men from Grevesmühlen

were set free. The public was told they had an alibi. On the night of the fire, they had been seen by the police shortly before the crime, far away from the crime scene. This police alibi later turned out to be false.

Just two days later, the prosecution, under the chairmanship of the senior public prosecutor, Klaus-Dieter Schultz, who is still in office, brought forward a new prime suspect. A paramedic named Jens Leonard had emerged as a witness and reported that Safwan Eid, a resident in the refugee hostel, had told him that night on the way to the hospital that he had started the fire. The witness said he had heard the phrase: "It was us."

Eid, who vehemently denied the charge, was brought in for questioning on the evening of January 19. He then languished in jail for over half a year. The allegations against him could not be substantiated.

Following the arrest of Eid, clues pointing in the direction of extreme right circles were ignored by the judiciary and police. The existence of the singed hair samples from the Grevesmühlen men was concealed from the public for months, and the samples disappeared mysteriously. An expert witness, who had testified under oath that she had forwarded the samples to the police, was charged with perjury.

There are many indications that the State Criminal Investigation Office (LKA) played a crucial role in keeping the right-wing suspects from becoming the focus of the investigation of the Lübeck attack. In the case of Eid, clues, facts and witness statements that exonerated the accused or substantiated suspicions about the men from Grevesmühlen were consistently ignored or dismissed as "irrelevant."

Even during the investigation, the press reported that the main witness against Eid, Jens Leonard, had ties to right-wing circles and possibly to at least one of Grevesmühlen men.

It also seemed that one of the suspects, Dirk Techentin, might have been an informant. The police files on him noted "personal details known," although this had not previously been reported.

Safwan Eid was finally acquitted in July 1997 due to the lack of evidence. In an appeal before the Kiel district court he was also found not guilty because there were "no indications" of "participation of the accused in the crime."

Following this, Maik Wotenow, one of the Grevesmühlen men, admitted to the crime more than once. The first time was in early 1997, when a store employee accused him of shoplifting in Gustrow. When the employee demanded that Wotenow return the stolen goods and threatened to call the police, Wotenow boasted, "The police can't touch me." He said he had been present during the attack in Lübeck and had helped set fire to the refugee home. When the employee

stood his ground, Wotenow and his cronies beat him up. The employee filed a complaint with the police and six weeks later identified Wotenow based on photos.

The authorities nevertheless refused to mount any further investigation of the Lübeck fire.

In February 1998, Wotenow went voluntarily to a department head in Neustrelitzer prison, where he was serving time for various offences, and confessed to the crime. The next day, he repeated his confession to detectives.

The official investigation came increasingly under suspicion because of the reported confessions. In January 2000, Eid's lawyer applied to the High Court for a prosecution case to be made against the men from Grevesmühlen. Shortly afterwards, the authorities silenced the detained Wotenow, sentencing him to a further six months in prison for making false accusations and deceiving the authorities through "false" confessions.

The arson attack in Lübeck happened almost exactly 16 years ago. It is a particularly serious example of how the security agencies held a protective hand over extreme right-wing criminals while turning victims into suspects. Similarly, the relatives of the victims of the Zwickau neo-Nazi murderers have been pressed to admit the deceased had "criminal connections."

The protection of the Lübeck suspects from 1996 to 2000 by the secret service, police and judiciary encouraged the violent neo-Nazi scene. In February 1998, the Zwickau three—Mundlos, Böhnhardt and Zschäpe—went to ground under the eyes of the security agencies and began their racist killing spree.



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