

# Germany: Secret service chief resigns following scandal over destruction of neo-Nazi files

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On Monday, the chief of the secret service, Heinz Fromm, announced his resignation. This was preceded by the exposure of explosive information about the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), as the domestic secret service is called. Shortly after the uncovering of the National Socialist Underground (NSU), a neo-Nazi terrorist cell, last November, documents were destroyed by the secret service relating to the undercover operatives inside the group who were directly linked to the extreme right in the state of Thuringia.

To recap: on November 4, 2011, the neo-Nazis Uwe Böhnhardt and Böhnhardt Mundlos were found dead in a mobile home in Eisenach, Thuringia. The police immediately said it was suicide. The same day, their alleged accomplice Beate Zschäpe blew up their apartment in Zwickau, in the neighbouring state of Saxony. All three are suspected of having murdered nine immigrants and a policewoman, and of robbing 14 banks.

On November 8, Zschäpe turned herself in to the police; two days later the federal attorney's office took over the investigation. The next day, seven personnel files of undercover agents were destroyed at the BfV.

From 1996-97 to 2003, the undercover operatives concerned had been part of the previously secret "Operation Rennsteig"—a joint project of the federal secret service, its state branch in Thuringia and military counterintelligence (MAD). Their target had been the infiltration of the right-wing extremist "Thüringer Heimatschutz" (THS, Thuringia Homeland Security), the organization in which Uwe Böhnhardt, Uwe Mundlos and Beate Zschäpe (later to become the NSU terrorists) were active at that time.

As the *Frankfurter Rundschau* reported, from a list of 73 names of those belonging to the THS, and which included Mundlos and Böhnhardt, the three intelligence agencies had filtered out a second list of 35 names. These individuals were to be approached to try and secure their collaboration with the secret service.

Operation Rennsteig recruited at least eight undercover agents from the THS. Six of them were controlled by the BfV, two worked for the Thuringia state secret service and at least one undercover operative for military counterintelligence.

It had been previously known that several undercover agents were in contact with the three right-wing terrorists. From 1994 to 2004, Tino Brandt was an informer for the secret service in Thuringia. During this time he received 200,000 deutsch marks from the secret service, which by his own account he used to build up the right-wing organization.

Ralf Wohlleben, the only one to be arrested beside Beate Zschäpe, joined the far-right German National Party (NPD) in 1999, founding its Jena District Association and becoming its chair. From 2002, he was deputy chair of the Thuringia state NPD and was also its press spokesman. He is said to have given the murder trio a weapon and ammunition, and according to intelligence reports from 1998, had "direct access" to the three as their "contact person" when they went into hiding.

The information already available on the case raises many questions.

According to Fromm (a member of the Social Democratic Party), the records can "no longer be reconstructed in their entirety." Nevertheless, he gave assurances that the information from the files had only been of "secondary importance." He was quoted by *Spiegel Online* saying, "Numerous undercover agents recruited at the time did not report to the 'National Socialist Underground' (NSU)."

Fromm claimed that "the official, who had the files shredded, had given an assurance in an official statement that before the destruction of the files he had convinced himself of the lack of contacts with the terrorist trio." Such an explanation is not worth the paper on which it is written. Who could ever check his testimony?

The senior official, a section leader, had repeatedly claimed that the files had been destroyed in January 2011 in

a “concerted action,” in order to meet the time limits for the retention of personal data. Moreover, in a letter to the Prosecutor General, it was said the files were not complete; some of the undercover agents were not listed for “operational reasons” as *Spiegel Online* quoted.

This was obviously a lie. The relevant personnel files existed until the November 11, 2011, nearly a year longer than they should have under the retention rules. But then they were destroyed just when the NSU case became public.

When this fact came to light, the chief of the secret service Fromm saw no other choice than to tender his resignation to Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich (Christian Social Union). The 63-year-old Fromm will take early retirement on July 31. Disciplinary proceedings have been instituted against the relevant section head.

The current developments cast a revealing light on the work and character of the secret service. The media and all parliamentary parties continue to speak and write about “breakdowns,” “omissions” or “failures.”

But in reality, the suspicion increasingly arises that the secret service—through its undercover agents—is implicated in the murders carried out by the Thuringia neo-Nazis, whether actively or to cover up for the culprits.

In any case, the intelligence agencies did not follow up on numerous pointers to a neo-Nazi terrorist scene. Several times, the three murders were able to avoid arrest under the very eyes of the security services.

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* reported earlier this week that in March 2003, the BfV had received concrete evidence from the Italian domestic intelligence AISI about a possible network of far-right terrorist cells in Germany.

After a meeting of European neo-Nazis in Belgium in November 2002, at which Italian and German right-wing extremists participated, the Italian intelligence service wrote to the BfV that Italian neo-Nazis had reported confidential conversations in which they had learned of the existence of a European network of militant neo-Nazis”, the letter from AISI in Rome read. This formed a “semi-autonomous underground base, with no official ties to the known [fascist] movements” and was able to conduct criminal activity using spontaneously formed cells. But the BfV apparently did not pursue this.

How close the secret service was to the three neo-Nazi terrorists, whether they may have collaborated with one or more of the three members of the NSU, is still unclear. All information relating to these links has been suppressed by the authorities and is no longer being pursued by the media and parliamentary parties.

For example, shortly before or even during the murder of Halit Yozgat in April 2006, a secret service representative in Hesse had visited the scene of the crime, an Internet cafe in

Kassel. He fled after the crime, but the police were able to locate him on the basis of computer data. But the authorities have refused to publish the files of this man, who himself has a right-wing background, or to disclose his agents in the far-right scene.

The latest example is a report in the tabloid *Berliner Kurier*, dated May 29. A little more than an hour after Zschäpe had blown up her apartment in Zwickau on November 4, 2011, someone had tried to call her. “What is intriguing: The number from which the call was made is registered to the Saxony State Ministry of the Interior. Who from the authorities in Dresden would want to speak to Zschäpe—and above all, why?” The paper claims to have dialled the phone number that had placed the call to Beate Zschäpe, but all they heard was “icy silence at the other end.”

Hardly anything can be heard as well from the Parliamentary Control Committee of the Bundestag (PKGr), which is by law supposed to have oversight of the secret services. Its members are drawn from all parliamentary parties and has far-reaching powers. Every member of the committee is entitled to access any premises of the German secret services and to demand access to documents. Moreover, any member of the PKGr can order secret service employees to undergo questioning, at which the respondent must answer fully and truthfully.

Wolfgang Neškovič, the representative of the Left Party in the PKGr since 2005, has continually refused to make public information from the committee. Instead of really throwing a light on the involvement of the state and its intelligence agencies with the extreme right, he calls on the secret services themselves to address these issues. “All the security services must participate with all their energy in a credible clarification of all the failures,” he says.



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