

German federal prosecutor brings charges against neo-Nazi terrorist

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On November 8 the German chief federal prosecutor's office announced charges against the neo-Nazi terrorist Beate Zschäpe. Along with Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt, the now 37-year old Zschäpe went underground in 1998. The three founded the far-right terrorist organisation National Socialist Underground (NSU), which was active for 13 years, killing nine immigrants and a police officer between 2000 and 2007.

The terrorist trio were also responsible for 15 armed bank robberies and two bomb attacks in Cologne in 2001 and 2004, in which more than 20 people sustained serious injuries, some life threatening.

Mundlos and Böhnhardt are dead and Zschäpe has been in prison on remand since November 2011. She gave herself up to the police a few days after her two companions were found dead in their caravan following a bank robbery.

Although the federal prosecutor's office has assumed that Böhnhardt and Mundlos carried out the murders and that there was no direct proof that Zschäpe participated or was present at the scene of the crimes, she is being charged with murder, and not just membership in a terrorist group. If the court upholds the charges, then she faces life imprisonment.

However, experts regard it as questionable whether the charge will stand up in court.

Federal Prosecutor Harald Range justified the murder charge by explaining the "NSU members saw themselves as a single death squad, which carried out its cowardly murders for racist and subversive motives". Zschäpe was an equal participant in the group, presented "the appearance of normality and legality", and was responsible for "ensuring an inconspicuous façade wherever they lived".

"She is thus just as responsible for the terrorist crimes

of the NSU as Uwe Böhnhardt und Uwe Mundlos, who directly carried out the murders and robberies", Range concluded.

Zschäpe is also accused of arson and attempted murder. On the same day the NSU group was raided by police, she set their shared accommodation on fire.

Along with Zschäpe, four NSU supporters have also been charged by the federal prosecutor. Former German National Party (NPD) functionaries Ralf Wohlleben and Carsten S are charged with accessory to murder. They are accused of having supplied the trio with their murder weapons. André E is charged with aiding an NSU bomb attack. The fifth accused, Holger G, is charged with supporting the NSU in three instances.

Federal Prosecutor Range reported the charges at a press conference without having previously informed Zschäpe's lawyers, or providing them with details. When Zschäpe's lawyer Wolfgang Stahl protested against this unusual procedure, the Federal Prosecutor declared that it had taken this "exceptional" measure to "counter speculation regarding the content of the charges and to prevent the public obtaining wrong information".

The federal prosecutor did not reveal what speculation he wanted to prevent with the media campaign. But since the NSU blew apart a year ago, evidence has mounted that in addition to the involvement of numerous figures from the far right, various state bodies were also in contact with the terror trio and knew about their crimes. Every week new information comes to light about undercover agents of the secret service and the criminal investigation departments on the periphery of the NSU, as well as the destruction of relevant files.

The question arises: is the federal prosecutor's office seeking to divert public attention from the involvement

of various state agencies by concentrating on a court action against Zschäpe guaranteed to hit the headlines? A remark by Range pointed to this. He stressed that the investigation had provided no indication of the participation of any third party at the scene of the NSU attacks, nor of the organisational involvement of other groups. The NSU was an “isolated group”, Range claimed, whose targets were known only to a few.

Federal Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich (Christian Social Union, CSU), whose department is responsible for many of the cover-ups surrounding the NSU, commented that “the charges have been laid, and I believe we can now see that the investigation continues”.

In reality, Zschäpe’s role in the NSU murders is relatively clear and required little investigation. Immediately following the death of her two accomplices, she sent a video to several newspapers admitting her involvement. There was never any doubt that she had lived with Böhnhardt and Mundlos throughout the entire period and was involved in their murderous deeds.

What has not been explained, however, is how the three could live for 13 years completely undisturbed and without employing any particular disguise in the middle of Germany, able to conduct their murderous handiwork. It would seem neither the federal prosecutors office nor Interior Minister Friedrich is especially interested in clarifying this question. Whether Zschäpe’s defence team, all three of whom do not come from the right-wing milieu, and the court will participate in this game, only the trial will show.

Much of the media has also sought to shine the spotlight entirely on Zschäpe. *Spiegel Online* wrote that the charges against her have “symbolic significance” because only through the figure of Zschäpe can “the injustice that arose—also through numerous failures in the investigation—be atoned for”.

Heribert Prantl, commenting in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, said the failure of all the institutions and agencies had become public knowledge in the past year. Only the federal prosecutors office, supported by the federal criminal police office, had functioned. “In this respect, the indictment text is also a text of hope”, he concluded absurdly. It keeps the hope alive that as far as other authorities are concerned, “all is not lost”.



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