

Germany: Inquiry committee posts interim report on neo-Nazi terrorist group

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On March 11, an interim report was released by the state of Thuringia's parliamentary committee investigating a series of murders committed by the National Socialist Underground (NSU) terrorist group. The report constitutes a damning indictment of the police force and secret service agency that directly aided and reinforced the extreme right in Thuringia during the 1990s.

The committee adopted the interim report by a margin of six votes. The two representatives of the Left Party, Martina Renner and Katharina King, abstained and registered a dissenting opinion. The committee's work was impeded by the shredding of files by the intelligence agency and memory lapses alleged by police and intelligence officials. However, the 554-page report draws on investigations extending over a year to produce a devastating picture of the state authorities' involvement in the neo-Nazi scene.

The report only covers the period up to January 26, 1998, when Uwe Böhnhardt, Uwe Mundlos and Beate Zschäpe went into hiding. The three then founded the NSU, which murdered eight Turkish and one Greek-born small businessmen and a female police officer, as well as committing numerous bank robberies in the following years. They had previously been active in the Thuringia Homeland Security (THS), a coalition of extreme right-wing groupings.

The committee accused the Thuringia State Intelligence Agency (LfV) of enlisting undercover agent Tino Brandt as "leader" of the extreme-right milieu. Brandt is regarded as the head of the Thuringia Homeland Security network and also deputy chairman of the Thuringia branch of the extreme right-wing National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). The report claims that Brandt was the agent through whom the LfV "at least indirectly supported the structure that

later radicalised the NSU trio".

The report rejects the idea that Brandt was a "top source" in the intelligence service. Brandt was said to have provided no evidence likely to lead to prosecutions, and merely informed the agency about neo-Nazis gatherings. From 1994 to 2001, Brandt was paid more than 200,000 German marks (US\$132,000) for his services—money he himself claims was invested in the consolidation of the extreme right in Thuringia.

The report assumes that the intelligence agency cautioned the police against investigating Tino Brandt, which amounts to an attempted obstruction of justice. Dorothea Marx (Social Democratic Party—SPD), chair of the inquiry committee, also regards as "not inconceivable" that members of the NSU were also protected from prosecution by forces from the ranks of the secret service.

The report also raises serious allegations against the Thuringia police. A special unit under the code name of "Rex" had been commissioned to combat right-wing extremism and operated in Thuringia until the mid-1990s, when it was disbanded. Furthermore, after 31 meetings and despite the interrogation of numerous police officers involved in the affair, the investigation committee was unable to uncover when, why or under whose authority this happened. Even leading officials professed they were unable to answer these questions.

The report also criticised the behaviour of the police in relation to the THS. Proceedings were opened against the THS on the grounds of its having established a criminal association, but they were "inconsistently" pursued and terminated in 1997. The opportunity to ban the THS, whose members included Böhnhardt, Mundlos and Zschäpe, was therefore lost.

The inquiry committee certainly portrays the conduct of the police and secret service as serious errors in an

otherwise worthwhile and viable system. The radicalisation of the alleged terrorists “was promoted in the 1990s by a dominant climate of turning a blind eye, failing to mount sufficient opposition and trivialising the deeds of right-wing activists”, according to the report.

Dorothea Marx (SPD) spoke of “serious errors”, and Dirk Adams (Greens) of a “fatal lack of resolution” in the fight against racism. Both saw the state of Thuringia as partly responsible for the NSU trio developing into murderers.

Martina Renner (Left Party) went a step further, saying the behaviour of the Thuringia intelligence department was the result of individual mistakes. The thinking and conduct of the state officials were “regulated by the system”. “When it comes to the intelligence agency, we don’t see slip-ups; we see liability”, she said, accusing the secret service of “criminal acts, immoral conduct and quashing of evidence”.

But the Left Party committee members failed to express what is obvious to any unbiased observer—i.e., that the promotion of and financial support for the extreme right in Thuringia was not the result of breakdowns and sloppy work, but was politically motivated.

At the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, right-wing groups were already being systematically channelled into former East Germany to steer protests against the Stalinist regime in a nationalist direction that eventually led to the reunification of Germany and the re-introduction of capitalism. The Stalinist Socialist Unity Party (SED), the predecessor organisation of the Left Party, supported this development and bears direct responsibility. Hans Modrow, the last SED/Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) prime minister of the German Democratic Republic, later revealed in his memoirs, “In my view, the path to unity was an imperative step that had to be taken with determination”.

In 1992, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Bernhard Vogel assumed leadership of the Thuringian government and cultivated ties with ultra-right circles. The former prime minister of Rhineland-Palatinate was an honorary member of the Arminia Burschenschaft (reactionary student fraternity), which had moved its headquarters from Jena in Thuringia to

Mainz in West Germany during the communist era. In 1995, Vogel was quoted as saying: “Where the Burschenschaft is prohibited, there can be no freedom”.

The report of the inquiry committee only vaguely mentioned this political background. Shortly after the founding of the LfV in 1991, “the interior ministry wielded massive influence on its staffing”. There were said to have been “significant security concerns” with regard to “at least two of these arranged staffing placements”. The interior ministry manifestly promoted specifically anti-communist forces.

Vogel’s term of office coincided with Helmut Roewer’s presidency of the Thuringia intelligence department from 1994 to 2000. Roewer was eventually suspended from service due to his involvement in numerous scandals. He had arranged financial aid for Tino Brandt and also provided the former Thuringia NPD leader and undercover agent, Thomas Dienel, with a total of 25,000 marks.

In 2003, the Erfurt public prosecutor charged Roewer with fraud and embezzlement in 60 cases. He was accused of arranging sham contracts worth €250,000 (US\$325,000), supposedly required for the payment of right-wing undercover agents. The proceedings were eventually dropped for procedural reasons.

When the parliamentary committee for the NSU affair interrogated Roewer, he refused to accept responsibility for any misconduct. Asked about a specific secret agent, he replied: “What concern is that of yours?”

The interim report from Thuringia investigates only a small number of the connections between the state authorities and the NSU. Among others, the Berlin State Office of Criminal Investigation (LKA) and the Federal Intelligence Agency (BfV) had deployed secret agents to cover the group. Under the code name of “Corelli”, a certain Thomas R. from Halle worked for the BfV in the NSU milieu for at least 10 years. It is impossible to believe that he did not have immediate and first-hand knowledge of the killings.



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