

Investigation into 1980 Munich Oktoberfest bombing reopened

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29 December 2014

The investigation into Germany's worst terrorist attack in post-World War II history is to be resumed. The far-right terrorist bombing of the Munich Oktoberfest in 1980, in which 12 people and the bomber were killed, has for decades raised questions about the relationship between state authorities and neo-Nazi terrorist groups.

Because of the evident close involvement of sections of the state security apparatus with the National Socialist Underground (NSU) terrorist group, the resumption of these proceedings is of great public interest.

Late in the evening of September 26, 1980, a homemade bomb placed in a wastepaper basket killed 12 Oktoberfest visitors and the bomber, Gundolf Köhler. More than 200 people were injured, a number of them seriously.

Although witnesses had seen the bomber talking to several people shortly before the explosion, the investigating authorities immediately attributed the deed to a sole perpetrator. Köhler was declared to be a lovesick student who wanted to bomb himself and others out of existence in a show of unrequited love.

All evidence pointing to the involvement of others, including accomplices from the extreme right-wing milieu, was suppressed. Not until more than two years after the crime—on November 23, 1982—were investigations opened by the federal public prosecutor.

The sole perpetrator thesis of the investigating authorities was already implausible 34 years ago. The mounting evidence accruing over the past three decades makes it even more suspect today.

Gundolf Köhler, the 21-year-old geology student from Donaueschingen (Baden-Württemberg), was attracted to the far-right in his early teens. A picture of Adolf Hitler had hung in his room when he was a child. He publicly defended the Holocaust, was interested in the extreme right-wing National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), and began to establish contacts with the far-right Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann (Armed Sports Group Hoffmann) at the age of 16. As a student, he tried to make contact with right-wing student groups.

His brother told police he saw himself as “part of a small elite” ready “to take power” in the event of a social upheaval in the Federal Republic.

In October 2011, *Der Spiegel* cited hitherto unpublished investigation files to claim that the authorities had known even then that Köhler was “firmly rooted in a milieu of militant neo-Nazis,” some of whom “maintained close contact with officials in the Christian Social Union (CSU)”.

Clues to Köhler's motives were also said to have emerged. *Der Spiegel* reported that, prior to the bomb plot, he had been sounding off about the upcoming 1980 federal election in which the then-Bavarian

Premier Franz Josef Strauss (CSU) was running against incumbent Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (Social Democratic Party—SPD).

He allegedly said it could be arranged for a bomb to explode in Bonn, Hamburg or Munich, and this could then be “blamed on the left, so that Strauß will be elected.” Immediately after the attack, Strauß and other CSU politicians did indeed claim that the RAF (Red Army Faction) and left-wing extremists were responsible. They accused Schmidt's government of gross incompetence in the fight against left-wing terrorism.

These accusations quickly subsided after it became known that Köhler had close relations with the extreme right. His contacts, particularly with the Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann terrorist group, which was banned in 1980, have meanwhile been proven.

Nevertheless, the investigating authorities made sure that all evidence of Köhler's connections with the neo-Nazi milieu disappeared. Not only the suitcase seen by several witnesses directly after the explosion disappeared, but other evidence was destroyed both after the incident and in 1997.

Among the objects collected from the crime scene were pieces of shrapnel and parts of a hand, which could not be assigned to any of the victims but whose fingerprints were found in Köhler's flat. The hand was therefore considered to be a crucial indication of the existence of an accomplice.

Some 47 butts of six different cigarette brands—with and without filters—were found in the front and back seat ashtrays of Köhler's car, which was parked 200 metres from the explosion. This further contradicted the view that Köhler had been alone in his car. However, when some of the victims' lawyers called for new DNA analyses in 2010, the Federal Criminal Investigation Agency (BKA) announced that, in line with normal legal procedure, all evidence in the case had been destroyed in 1997.

Frank Lauterjung, a key witness to the crime, saw Köhler with two other men before the explosion. He died of heart failure at the age of 38 in 1982. Lauterjung was the “second-ranking national leader” of the right-wing nationalist League of Homeland Loyal Youth (BHL) movement in the 1960s. He was expelled after the organisation suspected he had been “turned” by intelligence agents. Lauterjung then joined the Munich and later the Berlin Socialist German Student League (SDS). The investigators failed to pursue any of these clues.

Attorney Werner Dietrich, who for decades has conducted research and investigations on behalf of the surviving victims in an effort to have the proceedings reopened, has succeeded in gaining access to files hitherto held in secret. As a result, he has now been able to uncover witnesses who have been ignored by the police for three decades. Dietrich said there were five witnesses among those injured

in the explosion. They had already testified at the time as having seen Köhler together with a number of companions.

Eventually, the testimony of a certain woman was particularly instrumental in forcing Federal Prosecutor General Harald Range to resume the investigation. The woman testified that, on the day after the crime, she had seen an extreme right-wing student distributing leaflets about the Oktoberfest and Köhler's "heroic death." At the time, the police had still not made the name of the assassin known to the public. The student must therefore have already have known about the perpetrator.

A lead pointing to a connection between Köhler and Heinz Lembke (clue 253) also remained unpursued. Lembke escaped from East Germany to West Germany in 1959 and immediately joined right-wing extremist organisations such as the Patriotic Youth League (BVJ, banned in 1962), becoming the group's national director in 1960. He maintained close contact with a variety of other organizations like the BHJ. In 1968, he stood as a candidate for the extreme right-wing NPD.

Lembke oversaw at least 33 weapons depots—stockpiling rocket-propelled grenades, hand grenades, explosives, machine guns, pistols, ammunition and even chemical warfare agents, all of which was mostly obtained from Bundeswehr (German army) reserves. He also organised "paramilitary exercises" and became a supplier of weapons for neo-Nazi terrorists.

Lembke, a forestry official, evidently maintained contact with Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann, as did Köhler. The day after the Oktoberfest bombing, two detained right-wing extremists drew the investigators' attention to Lembke. A subsequent house search allegedly came up with nothing. It was only by chance that Lembke's weapons caches were discovered and he was arrested a year later.

After he had notified the federal prosecutor on Friday, October 30, 1981 that he wanted to make a comprehensive statement the following Monday, Lembke was found hanging from a cord in his cell. The Bundeswehr immediately destroyed the weapons found in Lembke's depots. A forensic comparison with the explosive used in the Oktoberfest bomb was not carried out.

Lembke, too, was portrayed as a loner and the investigation was quickly closed down. It was alleged that he had set up the weapons depots due to his fear of a Soviet invasion.

In files relating to the Oktoberfest bombing, the attorney Werner Dietrich found the words "Known facts about Lembke are only partly admissible in court." Such notations, according to Dietrich, are usually made only by undercover agents or secret service staff.

Everything known about the Munich Oktoberfest bombing and especially the reaction of the authorities conforms to the pattern of cooperation pursued by NATO and its paramilitary secret forces in Europe since the end of World War II—cooperation that is possibly still underway. The existence of these "stay-behind" forces first became widely known in Italy in 1990. Bombings in many European countries, such as the one at Bologna central station a few weeks before the 1980 Oktoberfest attack, have been proved to be attributable to the extreme right-wing Gladio forces. A total of 85 people died at the time.

The first paramilitary shock troops of the Gladio forces in Germany were established by US intelligence agents and former Nazis immediately after the war. The Technical Service of the League of German Youth (BDJ) set up weapons depots, organised paramilitary exercises, and compiled a death list of left-wing politicians and trade unionists, including prominent SPD politicians such as Herbert

Wehner.

They pursued the same aims as those of the Werwolf underground movement established by the Nazis towards the end of the war. In the event of an invasion by Soviet troops, paramilitary underground troops operating behind enemy lines were to engage in combat, commit acts of sabotage and carry out assassinations. Heinz Lembke is said to have left behind a handwritten suicide note in which he had scrawled: "It's time for the wolf."

The BDJ was banned in 1952, but its structures were maintained by the German intelligence service (BND) as part of the NATO Gladio troops under former Nazi General Reinhard Gehlen.

To what extent Lembke and the Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann worked for the official Gladio NATO troops was never made known. According to Daniele Ganser, a Swiss historian who researches the Gladio forces, the quantity and quality of the recovered military equipment clearly indicate that Lembke was a member of the secret organisation.

In 2008, journalist Tobias von Heymann revealed Stasi (East German secret police) files that documented regular radio contact with the West German intelligence service emanating from Lembke's place of residence. The Stasi attributed these radio contacts to a "stay-behind" organisation called Group 27. Von Heymann also reported on two members of the banned Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann who had allegedly belonged to Köhler's circle and claimed to have participated in the attacks. One of them was Walter Ulrich Behle, an undercover agent of the North Rhine-Westphalia secret service agency.

The racist murders and terrorist attacks carried out by the National Socialist Underground are not the only facts revealing that German intelligence agencies and state authorities cooperate closely with right-wing terrorists. The boundaries between the state and right-wing terror have long been fluid. The ruling elites have banked on using terrorist groups since their inception as instruments of counter-revolution against the European working class. Their attacks have always been exploited to upgrade the state's apparatus of control.

It is clear that the attack on the Oktoberfest in Munich in 1980 was part of this tradition. Federal Prosecutor General Range and the investigating authorities will once again do everything possible to conceal the real background to the Oktoberfest bombing.

The state's purpose in reopening the case was revealed by Federal Justice Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) last year in a letter to the Green Party faction leader in the Bavarian state parliament, Margarete Bause. He declared that, in view of the shortcomings in the NSU murders trial, "any loss of confidence in the activities of the state's investigative authorities must be opposed."



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