

New revelations in the 1980 Munich Oktoberfest bombing

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On February 4, the German ARD television channel broadcast the documentary “Assassins—A Single Perpetrator? Latest revelations about the Oktoberfest bombing,” by Daniel Harrich. It uncovers how government authorities stymied investigations into the worst terrorist act in postwar German history and suggests intelligence agents could have been involved in the attack.

On September 26, 1980, a pipe bomb explosion at the main entrance of the Munich Oktoberfest killed thirteen people and injured another 211, 68 of them seriously. Although the bomber, Gundolf Köhler, who was killed in the explosion, was in contact with the far-right Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann (Armed Sports Group Hoffmann), and there was plenty of evidence of his complicity in the crime, the Bavarian State Criminal Investigations Office and federal prosecutor Kurt Rebmann rapidly committed themselves to a sole perpetrator thesis, terminating the investigation after two years.

Investigations into the case resumed last December, due primarily to the persistent research of journalist and non-fiction author Ulrich Chaussy and efforts of the victims’ attorney, Werner Dietrich, to prevent the nearly 35 year old case from disappearing from the public eye.

The ARD documentary is based on their findings. The evidence and leads that they unearthed, point “to the existence of a complex, extreme right-wing network and an act planned well in advance, in which Köhler was only the last link in a deadly chain of events,” the documentary reports.

Two previous attempts by Dietrich to have the case reopened were unsuccessful. New witnesses, coming forward after the airing of the feature film *The Blind Spot*, finally induced the federal prosecutor’s office to resume investigations. *The Blind Spot*, also scripted and directed by Daniel Harrich, deals with the Oktoberfest bombing, the suspiciously lopsided investigation and Chaussy’s research. Chaussy is played in the film by Benno Fürmann. It was premièred at the Munich Film Festival in July 2013, and initially shown on the Arte public television channel on October 10, 2014.

Since then, an increasing number of witnesses who saw Köhler arguing with a stranger before the explosion have come forward. A female witness had already testified to the police about this in 1980. In 1983, she meticulously described to Chaussy the course of events leading up to the explosion, but allowed neither film nor sound recordings of her statement, fearing reprisals from the people behind the attack. Only now, 35 years later, was she willing to be interviewed on camera.

Someone who apparently knew in advance about the bombing was also traced. Just one day after the attack, he was found in possession of leaflets, hailing the bomber Köhler, although his name had still not

been released to the public at the time. This right-wing suspect then fled to Argentina but is now back in Germany. His whereabouts are known to the authorities and an initial hearing has allegedly been held.

Another witness, who has now reported to Chaussy, claims to have seen Köhler talking intensely to the occupants of a car in front of the entrance to the festival site. He says Köhler then put a bright plastic bag into a rubbish bin. The witness states that he smelled fireworks and, shortly after, the bomb exploded. He says he reported this to the investigators a few days after the attack, but his statement was never subjected to further investigation.

A key piece of evidence in the case was a severed hand that did not come from any of the victims and was attributed to the bomber, Köhler. The documentary film now includes the statement of a certain Gerd Ester, who was involved as a Federal Criminal Investigation Agency (BKA) explosives expert in the 1980 investigation. Ester claims he reconstructed the bomb and concluded that the hand could have not come from Köhler, because Köhler was bending over the bomb when it exploded and his hands would have been “atomised”.

Chaussy concludes that it was the hand of an accomplice. A female witness, who worked in Oststadt Hospital in Hanover in 1980, has also recently come forward. After the attack, she treated a patient who had lost an arm. She says he had been sitting upright in bed with “a proud glowing look on his face” and was visited by some men who were obviously right-wing radicals.

The young man had refused to explain how he came to be injured, but he apparently told someone that he had been playing with explosives which caused the accident. He disappeared after a few days, before the stitches were removed.

Finding this man today would be a difficult task. In 1997, the prosecutor general allowed all evidence retained by the Criminal Police Office (LKA) in Munich to be destroyed due to “lack of [storage] space”. Among the destroyed evidence were cigarette butts from the ashtrays in Köhler’s car, possibly smoked by his accomplices. The butts were discarded the very year that DNA analysis was first officially approved as courtroom evidence.

Chaussy and Dietrich had originally assumed the hand was destroyed after its discovery. Chaussy now claims he knows this was not the case. The severed hand was never delivered to the Office of the Federal Prosecutor General in Karlsruhe. After the bombing, the Bavarian LKA had initially sent it on to the forensic institute in Munich for serological (blood serum) examination.

There, Chaussy found a form with a stamped reception date and other documents, stating it had been impossible to verify that the hand was part of Köhler’s corpse. Apart from this, there was no trace of the missing hand. Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Eisenmenger, former head of

forensic medicine at Munich University, says: “Strangely enough, we’ve compiled a large number of laboratory records over many years, but we have no records covering this particular time. We don’t know where the hand could have ended up. We don’t know whether it was incinerated, or whether it was returned. We have no firm evidence about what happened to it.”

Records of the Bavarian LKA, however, indicate that the hand was returned to the LKA. All traces of it ends there. The LKA is subject to the control of the Bavarian interior ministry, which—as Chaussy demonstrates—pressed the investigators to adhere to the solo perpetrator theory.

Max Strauß, son of former Bavarian Prime Minister Franz Josef Strauss [Christian Social Union, CSU], comments on this in the documentary: “Of course, if they uncovered something there internally, they would have taken swift action to cover for themselves in the old CSU way. It was the usual practice.” At the time, Franz Josef Strauß was the leading candidate for the Christian Democratic Union [CDU] and CSU coalition in the federal election, which took place just 10 days after the Oktoberfest bombing.

Köhler’s connection with Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann indicates the possible involvement of intelligence agencies in the Oktoberfest bombing. This paramilitary organisation was founded in 1973 by Karl Heinz Hoffmann, and was able to train neo-Nazis in the use of weapons and guerrilla warfare in Bavaria for six years, unimpeded by the authorities. Gundolf Köhler participated in such exercises in 1976 and 1977. This was known to the Baden-Württemberg Office for the Protection of the Constitution (intelligence service).

Only on January 30, 1980, eight months before the Oktoberfest bombing, was the outfit banned by the liberal federal interior minister, Gerhart Baum. At the time, the militia had 400 members. Two-and-a-half months after the Oktoberfest bombing, another member of the paramilitary group, Uwe Behrendt, killed Jewish publisher Shlomo Levin and his partner Frieda Poeschke in Erlangen.

Hoffmann and his closest associates moved to Lebanon after the ban. Chaussy is sure there were several undercover agents in Wehrsportgruppe. The files remain unopened, but two names are now known: Walter Ulrich Behle and Odfried Hepp.

Behle, who checked into a hotel with Hoffmann in the Syrian capital of Damascus in October 1980, told a bartender at the time about the Oktoberfest bombing, boasting: “That was us.” He said they had put one bomb in a garbage bin and another in a drainage gutter.

A new witness supports the claim that there was a second bomb. He says that on the day of the attack, he saw a flame coming from a bomb that had failed to explode. He also says it was lying in a drain or street gutter.

The bartender at the hotel in Damascus immediately reported Behle’s statement to the German Embassy. When he was interrogated in Germany in July 1981, his statement was deemed to be “alcohol-related bragging”.

On August 2, 1982, Wehrsportgruppe member Stefan Wagner, who was on the run from the police, also told someone he had been involved in the Oktoberfest bombing. After the police arrested him, he was sentenced to a minimum of 10 years in prison. He then shot himself. Since Wagner allegedly could not have been at the scene of the crime on the day of the bombing, investigators called off any further investigations. Nor did they consider whether Wagner might have been involved in preparations for the bombing.

The testimony of a police officer who has now turned to Chaussy is noteworthy. It establishes a connection between Wehrsportgruppe

Hoffmann and the Thüringer Heimatschutz (Thuringian Homeland Security) organisation, from which the National Socialist Underground (NSU) extreme right-wing terrorist group emerged. Another lead points to the possible involvement of NATO’s secret Gladio forces, which have committed terrorist acts in Italy, Luxembourg and other countries.

According to the police officer who carried out investigations in the Thüringer Heimatschutz milieu, the organisation’s paramilitary exercises in the 1980s were conducted together with the Bavarian militia group. Two years before going into hiding in 1998, NSU terrorists Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt were photographed at the trial of far-right terrorist Manfred Roeder. In 1980, Roeder founded the German Action Groups, which, among other things, carried out bomb attacks on the homes of refugees.

The explosives were supplied to them by Heinz Lembke, who lives in Uelzen near Hannover, where the alleged accomplice was treated in Oststadt Hospital. Swiss historian Daniele Ganser, who researches NATO’s Gladio forces, assumes Lembke was a member of these paramilitary underground armies, because he was known to be stockpiling and managing weapons and explosives from military reserves.

Lembke probably provided Köhler with the explosives, but investigators also failed to act on this clue. Lembke was found hanging by a cable in his cell in late 1981, shortly after he announced his intention to lodge a comprehensive testimony with the federal prosecutor.

Marginal notes in relevant files led attorney Dietrich to suspect that Lembke was either a confidential informant or an employee of a state or federal intelligence agency. Important files relating to him are still under wraps.

Chaussy has raised the question of whether Bavarian head of state security Dr. Hans Langemann [CSU], who previously worked for the foreign intelligence service (BND), had at that time built up a similar network of undercover agents in the radical right-wing milieu, comparable to the one later associated with the NSU. This might explain why he leaked sensitive information about Köhler to the press and thus warned the bomber’s possible accomplices. Langemann died in 2004.

Chaussy suspects that the informant network organised by Langemann proved a failure in the 1980s, as did the one involving Thüringer Heimatschutz at a later stage. Chaussy’s work on the Oktoberfest bombing and revelations about the NSU and its supporters also suggests a different conclusion: that German secret service agencies virtually amount to a state within the state, which collaborates with right-wing extremists.

Daniel Harrich’s documentary ends with the notice: “The story continues”.



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