

Co-defendant Ralf Wohlleben testifies in German neo-Nazi trial

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Ralf Wohlleben, one of the co-defendants in the ongoing National Socialist Underground (NSU) trial in Germany, gave testimony last week after having remained silent for two-and-a-half years.

Wohlleben is charged with acting as an accessory to a series of racially motivated murders that took place in Germany in the early 2000s.

The NSU trial, which has been ongoing since May 2013, has achieved national prominence in Germany because it has exposed the close connections between German state intelligence forces and the country's far-right movement.

Wohlleben, an unrepentant neo-Nazi and former German National Party (NPD) functionary, testified for two hours by reading a written statement. His testimony follows that of Beate Zschäpe, the principal defendant, who is charged with complicity in 10 murders, two bombings in Cologne and several bank robberies.

Wohlleben is accused of having aided the NSU in carrying out the murders. He is said to have helped Zschäpe and two fellow neo-Nazis to escape capture, to have supported the trio in the underground and procured the weapon with which the gang carried out 10 murders. Wohlleben pleaded not guilty to the charges.

According to co-defendant Carsten S., who as a defector from the extreme-right scene had already given a comprehensive statement at the beginning of the trial, Wohlleben had commissioned him to procure the murder weapon, and had given him the money for it. Carsten S. admitted that he handed over the 9mm pistol to the terrorists that was later used to kill nine immigrants and the police officer Michèle Kiesewetter.

Wohlleben denied that he had commissioned Carsten S. and given him the money, instead blaming Carsten S. himself. Wohlleben, a 40-year-old neo-Nazi, who

had played an active leading role in the right-wing scene for over 20 years, depicted himself as an innocent. He had always been against violence in pursuit of political goals, he said. Instead, he declared that he and his political allies had constantly been victims of state persecution and violence by "left-wing anti-fascists".

He showed the court a PowerPoint presentation depicting burned-out vehicles, including his own, which had supposedly been set on fire by left-wingers. "The squad of neo-Nazis in the public gallery, including a former terrorist, was pleased," remarked the *Tagesspiegel*.

Wohlleben claims to have known nothing about the crimes committed by the NSU until the deaths of Zschäpe's two accomplices, Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt, in November 2011. He therefore denied being the "controlling central figure" of the facilitators of the NSU, as charged by the prosecution. At the same time, he admitted to having helped Zschäpe, Böhnhardt and Mundlos in their escape and of keeping in contact with them for years in the underground.

He justified this based on his friendship with the trio, whom he had known since the mid-1990s. Together with the alleged NSU supporter André Kappke, he had first met the three in Thuringia, possibly in 1994. This was also where the murdered police officer, Kiesewetter, had grown up. Wohlleben and the three had gone to political events and demonstrations and had often been together on vacation, he said.

Wohlleben reported that he had "acted as lookout" in 1997 when Böhnhardt and Mundlos hung a doll's torso with a yellow Star of David on a motorway bridge in the city of Jena and placed a fake bomb next to it. Zschäpe had not been there.

He also admitted that he had lent the three his car

when they went into hiding on January 26, 1998. They had first driven to Hanover. Along the way, they had been stopped by the police but were not arrested. Finally, the car had a breakdown and together with a friend, Wohlleben towed them to a garage. There the car was picked up by another comrade, an informant of the Thuringian state secret service.

Wohlleben also reported that he repeatedly met Zschäpe, Mundlos and Böhnhardt after they had gone into hiding. At that time, Wohlleben was deputy state chairman of the NPD in Thuringia. He specifically mentioned a meeting in May 2001.

Eight months earlier, in September 2000, the NSU had committed its first murder in Nuremberg, where the florist Enver Simsek was shot. Shortly after the meeting mentioned by Wohlleben followed three more murders—Abdurrahim Özüdo?ru (June 2001 in Nuremberg), Süleyman Ta?köprü (June 2001 in Hamburg) and Habil K?l?ç (August in 2001 in Munich). Wohlleben said he knew nothing about these crimes at the time.

Wohlleben sought to use his testimony to exonerate himself, and only admit to what could no longer be denied. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that his testimony heavily implicates the secret services.

For example, he claimed that Tino Brandt, a long-time informant of the secret service, was responsible for the radicalisation of the right-wing scene in Thuringia. Brandt had also organised the support for the trio after their escape, he said, and hinted that Brandt, who in his own words had received a total of 200,000 deutsche marks from the intelligence services, had provided the money for the murder weapon.

Wohlleben said it was inexplicable that the state had been unable to find the trio despite the many informers in the right-wing scene. From a statement by Böhnhardt and Mundlos to him, he concluded that Brandt had known the whereabouts of the three murderers. In other words, the secret service could have picked up the three terrorists from information provided by its informant Brandt, if it had wanted to.

Wohlleben's remarks about Brandt and the secret service should be taken seriously, because it is known from other sources that state intelligence forces had the NSU under close surveillance. To date, 25 undercover agents have been revealed to have been around the NSU.

It is as yet unknown whether the secret service also had an informant in the NSU inner circle. Zschäpe had held talks with the secret service prior to going underground, and a few hours after the death of her two friends on November 4, 2011 she was called several times from a mobile phone belonging to the Saxony state interior ministry.



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