German army officer arrested for planning terror attack

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The arrest of a 28-year-old German army officer suspected of planning a right-wing terrorist attack raises troubling questions. What initially looked like a bizarre isolated case has quickly demonstrated that the Bundeswehr, the German army, provides fertile ground for extreme right-wing elements.

Franco A. was arrested last Wednesday after trying to retrieve a weapon hidden in Vienna Airport. Up until then he had not come to the notice of Germany's security agencies.

It soon became clear that Franco A. lived a double life. For eight years he has been a full-time soldier in the Bundeswehr, where he rose to the rank of first lieutenant. He was stationed in the French town of Illkirch.

Simultaneously, he registered as a Syrian refugee under the name of David Benjamin at the end of 2015. Although he came from Offenbach near Frankfurt, spoke no Arabic and communicated with the authorities in French, he was recognised as a refugee and assigned to a refugee camp. In addition to his earnings as a soldier he also received benefits as a refugee.

Since his arrest, the suspicion has been substantiated that Franco A., under his false refugee identity, was planning a terror attack against leftist politicians or activists, which was then to be blamed on refugees.

While the security authorities and Defence Ministry are stonewalling and only confirming in part what is already known, research by journalists has revealed that Franco A. espoused extreme right-wing positions, which were known to his military superiors. In house searches, lists with leftist and anti-fascist targets were found.

On Friday, *Spiegel Online* reported that Franco A. attracted attention with his extreme right-wing views as far back as 2014, when he studied at the French military university in Saint-Cyr. His master's thesis was rejected because he recapitulated "staunch racial and right-wing extremist opinions and did not distance himself from the relevant thinkers or philosophers." Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen has confirmed this.

At that time, a professor at the university drew the conclusion that the master's thesis "was not compatible with liberal democratic principles," *Spiegel Online* reports. A scholar from the Centre for Military History and Social Sciences of the Bundeswehr, who read the thesis, concluded that the text clearly contained "racial thinking."

However, the suspicions raised against Franco A. were dropped after he had assured his German superior at the university that the right-wing passages in his work were the product of time pressure. The superior arrived at the conclusion that Franco A. did not hold extreme right-wing positions and gave him a "second chance." Franco A. then wrote a new thesis that was accepted.

Allegedly, the incident was neither recorded in Franco A.'s personnel files nor forwarded to the responsible military security service (MAD). According to *Spiegel Online*, it only came to light because a soldier who could remember the incident reported it to his superiors.

On Sunday, *Spiegel Online* then reported that a "list of possible targets for attacks or assaults against leftist and anti-fascist organisations and individuals" was found in house searches. Security circles have confirmed the existence of the list, but have refused to comment on its likely purpose.

At least two people—the Berlin Left Party deputy Anne Helm, who campaigns against far-right tendencies, and the head of the organisation "Centre for

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Political Beauty," which has organised artistic activities against right-wing extremism and arms exports—have been informed by the police they were on the list.

The case of Franco A. confirms that far-right elements are drawn to the Bundeswehr where their neo-fascist opinions are either tolerated or encouraged. In the course of the past few months there have been a series of scandals involving the abuse and sexual assault of cadets during training, including incidents at barracks in Pfullendorf and Sonderhausen.

This trend has assumed a new dimension with the latest report that a far-right terrorist attack was apparently being planned from within the ranks of the Bundeswehr. It is difficult to imagine that Franco A. had no confidantes or accomplices.

Even advocates of the Bundeswehr, such as the defence spokesman of the SPD parliamentary faction, Rainer Arnold, had to admit: "Filtering out extreme right-wing radicals has not always worked well in the Bundeswehr. Evidently not enough has been done."

According to Hans-Peter Bartels (Social Democratic Party, SPD), the parliamentary commissioner for the armed forces, the Bundeswehr is "structurally more susceptible" than other sectors of society. "Hierarchies, weapons, uniforms—that appeals to some applicants whom the Bundeswehr should not want," he told *Welt am Sonntag*.

Von der Leyen had to concede that the military leadership of the Bundeswehr had a "problem of demeanour" and a "misconceived esprit de corps," which repeatedly leads to a situation where misconduct is not properly pursued. "Instead they look away, until a scandal erupts. And that's not okay," she told the ZDF television channel. "The Bundeswehr has problem of demeanour and evidently has leadership weaknesses at different levels."

In fact, what is at issue here is neither a "problem of demeanour" nor a "weakness." The appeal of the Bundeswehr for right-wing and far-right forces is the inevitable result of the return of German militarism. Its transformation into a professional army, which wages war and kills all over the world, inevitably attracts elements who espouse right-wing and militaristic conceptions with regard to other political and social issues.

The demand by von der Leyen and other members of the government, that Germany once again "take responsibility" and play a political and military role appropriate to its economic clout, also serves to attract such elements.

In the Weimar Republic, the General Staff of the Reichswehr, the Freikorps and the paramilitary groups, which emerged from the army after Germany's defeat in the First World War, formed a state within the state. They provided a breeding ground for far-right organizations and acts of violence. Many socialists, including Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were murdered by them, and they formed the basis for Hitler's notorious storm troopers.

For a long time all this seemed to be relegated to history. But now it is clear that all the talk about "citizens in uniform" and "inner leadership" has changed nothing about the character of militarism. The case of Franco A. is a warning. With the growth of militarism, the danger from the extreme right-wing is also growing.

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