

Nazi traditions of Germany's Armed Forces come to the fore

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Last Thursday, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen apologized to Germany's generals for reproaching the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) with having an "attitude problem" and a "wrongly understood esprit de corps." Since then systematic attempts are being made to hide the full extent of the right-wing conspiracy in the military.

After the arrest of 28-year-old First Lieutenant Franco A, who is accused of preparing terrorist attacks while falsely pretending to be a refugee, it soon emerged that his neo-Nazi sympathies had long been known and tolerated by his superiors, and that such views are widespread in the Bundeswehr. Now suspicions are growing that Franco A is part of a larger network reaching into the leadership structures of the Bundeswehr.

In the Fürstenberg Barracks in Donau-Eschingen, a meeting room decorated with memorabilia from the Wehrmacht (Hitler's army) was discovered. The hurried attempts at a cover-up and an order from General Inspector Volker Wiekert, the Bundeswehr's highest-ranking general, to search all barracks and Bundeswehr buildings for such commemorative Wehrmacht items cannot hide the fact that the preservation of Wehrmacht traditions and the toleration of neo-Nazi views in the Bundeswehr are not individual lapses, but a widespread, systemic phenomenon.

In some barracks, no search is necessary to recognize the continuity of Hitler's Wehrmacht. A look at the name of the barracks is enough.

Two barracks are named after Hitler's most famous military commander, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Three bear the names of fighter pilots awarded hero status under the Nazis—Hans-Joachim Marseille, Helmut Lent and Hermann von der Lieth-Thomsen—and two bear the names of tank commanders who were

prominent in the war of extermination against the Soviet Union—Dirk Lilienthal and Adelbert Schulz. Another one is named after Paul von Hindenburg, a key figure in the First World War, who, as German president, appointed Hitler as Reich chancellor in 1933.

In the Leclerc Barracks in the French town of Illkirch, where Franco A served in an infantry battalion, the traditions of the Wehrmacht and the Nazis were obviously a matter of course. According to *Spiegel Online*, investigators find "more and more signs of a far-right fellowship in the barracks around Franco A."

Although German soldiers have been stationed there only since 2010, the wall of the recreation room, the so-called "bunker," was painted with Wehrmacht soldiers. The base commander admitted he had visited the bunker, but said the large-scale depictions of the Wehrmacht soldiers were not evident to him.

Already in 2012, there was a scandal at the Leclerc barracks when soldiers spread a four-meter-wide swastika on the ground during an international football match. This case was reported to superiors and the Ministry of Defence, in contrast to the neo-Nazi attitudes of Franco A. However, except for minor fines for three soldiers, it did not have any consequences.

Militaristic propaganda by politicians, the media and historians also plays an important role in the promotion of Wehrmacht traditions. Three years ago, leading politicians, including von der Leyen, announced that Germany must once again play a global political and military role appropriate to its economic clout. Bundeswehr soldiers have been sent to Afghanistan, Mali and other countries and are now accustomed to fighting and killing. This inevitably boosts the glorification of the Wehrmacht.

An important ideological step in the rehabilitation of the Wehrmacht was already made in 1999, when, after

a fierce public debate, the travelling exhibition “The Crimes of the Wehrmacht—War of Annihilation 1941-44,” which had attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors over four years, was cancelled and its director Hannes Heer dismissed.

At the time, the WSWS commented, “All those who have an interest in preserving the myth of the Wehrmacht, from the nationalist German historians and magazine columnists to the parties in the SPD-Green government coalition and the ‘tradition-conscious’ Bundeswehr generals, to the right-wing extremist skinheads on the streets—all felt encouraged by the dismissal of Heer.” This has now been confirmed.

First Lieutenant Franco A's Infantry Battalion 291 is directly involved in the international war efforts of the Bundeswehr. “This battalion stationed in France is no ordinary unit, but a kind of pioneer organization for special tasks,” reports the website NachDenkSeiten. “The battalion is present where it is geopolitically precarious, such as in Lithuania or Mali. It is also involved in politically explosive maneuvers like Operation ‘Sabre Strike’ 2015 in Poland, which was commanded not by NATO but by the US Army.”

According to *Der Spiegel*, Franco A was a member of the staff responsible for planning “international exercises and maneuvers.” His superior, the battalion commander Colonel Marc-Ulrich Cropp, has excellent international and political connections. He participated in training missions in the US several times; from 2008 to 2010 he completed elite training with the US Marine Corps. He then headed the planning department for operations of the Bundeswehr special forces in the German Ministry of Defence.

In the Ministry of Defence, Cropp worked closely with high-ranking politicians, according to NachDenkSeiten. This included the head of the planning staff, Ulrich Schlie, a member of the Atlantik-Brücke, which describes itself as “private, non-profit, nonpartisan association with the goal of building a bridge between Germany and the United States.” Membership is by invitation only. Schlie began his career working with Wolfgang Schäuble and as a foreign policy advisor to Roland Koch (both leading Christian Democratic politicians). Cropp also worked with Schlie's successor Géza Andreas von Geyr, who also came from Schäuble's circle and was vice president of the secret service BND from 2010 to 2014.

Franco A also seems to have maintained international contacts. In January 2017, he attended the elite “Officers' Ball” at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna. According to the organizers, the annual social event is “a meeting place not only for officers of the Austrian Armed Forces and Viennese society, but also for European politics and business.” Its sponsors included the major international armaments companies Krauss-Maffei Wegmann, BAE Systems and General Dynamics.

Franco A's visit to the Officer's Ball became known because afterwards he hid a gun in a toilet at Vienna airport, which was discovered by maintenance staff. At the beginning of February, Franco A fell into a trap laid by the Austrian police as he sought to pick up the gun from its hiding place.

Franco A's neo-Nazi views, their cover-up by his superiors, the prominent status and international connections of his battalion, and many unresolved questions indicate that he was a cog in a wider conspiracy. The great effort being undertaken by the law enforcement authorities certainly suggests this. Following his arrest, which took place only three months after he went to recover the gun in Vienna, 90 police officers searched 16 buildings in Germany, Austria and France.

However, the public has been informed only about two accomplices so far. One was found to be in possession of 1,000 rounds of ammunition and other material from Bundeswehr bases. The other is said to have drawn up a list of possible targets of a terror attack, which includes left-wing activists and Bundestag (parliamentary) deputies, former President Gauck, Justice Minister Heiko Maas, and Jewish and Muslim associations.

While the media report extensively about every newly discovered piece of Wehrmacht memorabilia, the background and possible links of this sinister network are veiled in silence.



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