

# Defence Minister Von der Leyen downplays size of right-wing terrorist cell in German army

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12 May 2017

After more information was made public Tuesday about the existence of a neo-Nazi terrorist cell in the German army (Bundeswehr), the parliamentary defence committee met Wednesday for an emergency session with Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen.

After the meeting of the committee, which conducts its business in secret, Von der Leyen announced a few cosmetic reforms aimed at downplaying the affair. She intended to ensure the political education of the soldiers, she stated, and make the chain of reporting incidents in the army quicker and more efficient. In addition, she intends to add an explicit distancing from the Wehrmacht, the German army under the Nazi regime, to the Bundeswehr's 1982 Tradition Directive.

The Social Democrats (SPD) also took great pains to downplay the scale of the events. SPD defence policy spokesman Rainer Arnold even attacked the Defence Minister from the right. He accused her of creating a climate of uncertainty and mistrust of the troops because she is raising the suspicion of the existence of a far-right terrorist network in the army without any concrete evidence.

Neither the SPD nor the opposition Greens or Left Party called for the resignation of the minister, who has led the defence ministry for three-and-a-half years and bears full responsibility for the army as its supreme commander.

Given the scale of the events that have taken place, Von der Leyen's proposal to respond with an educational programme and a revision of the tradition directive is bizarre. It has now been confirmed that a right-wing terrorist cell existed in the army which was preparing attacks on high-ranking politicians and representatives of the state, Jewish and Muslim organisations, and left-wing activists.

Two officers and one student have been arrested thus far for hoarding weapons and munitions, preparing lists of potential targets and undertaking complex arrangements to blame the attacks on refugees. First Lieutenant Franco A., who was the first to be arrested, registered with a false identity as a Syrian refugee with the assistance of First

Lieutenant Maximilian T., who is now also in custody.

One only needs to imagine what the response would have been if comparable plans for attacks by Islamist organisations had been discovered. The country would be placed under a state of emergency.

It remains entirely unclear how large the terrorist cell in the army is, whether Franco A. and Maximilian T. had other co-conspirators or accomplices, or even if they acted under the guidance of others. What is beyond doubt is that their neo-Nazi ideas had been known about for a long time and were systematically covered up by their superiors and the Military Surveillance Service (MAD). Investigations against them were frequently suspended or dragged out.

The latest information to come to light was that a superior of Franco A. requested a security check on him in February 2016 because he was being employed in a new "security sensitive activity." No notice was taken of the fact that A. only provided the required declaration of understanding in November, after he had been active in his post for some time. A defence ministry spokesperson told Stern that the proceedings were "not yet fully investigated."

In light of the frequency of cases in which suspected right-wing terrorists were concealed, it is no longer possible to speak of "mishaps," as many media reports now do. In reality, it is becoming ever clearer that the army intelligence service, which is responsible for surveillance of soldiers, is a hotbed for right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis.

Recently a MAD officer, who is also a city councillor for the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the Cologne city council, was reported to the Cologne state prosecutor because he tweeted the banned SA (Nazi paramilitary) slogan "Germany awake!" This occurred in January, but has not resulted in any consequences until now. The Twitter account concerned has been deleted in the meantime.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the terrorist cell was able to thrive in the army on the basis of widespread right-

wing extremist networks which reach into the highest levels of the army command.

WDR conducted an interview with Christian Weißgerber, who was active in the right-wing scene as part of the autonomous nationalists, and joined the army in 2008. He explained that the army was heavily populated with “national conservative, racist persons.” In his group of 12 recruits, there were at least three who identified as right-wing extremists.

Weißgerber reported in detail about right-wing extremist tendencies in the officer ranks. He discussed with an officer about the Freemasons, Illuminati and other secret groupings steeped in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. And this was not the only incident with one of his superiors.

“I had a black, white and red towel, which was also seen,” stated Weißgerber. “But the superior simply said, ‘Hang that up again tomorrow when the colleague takes over the barrack room. He’ll be happy about that.’ I did it and he was actually happy.” Black, white and red were the colours of the Kaiser’s regime and the Nazis, and are used by right-wing extremist groups.

The internet portal bento interviewed a soldier named Dominik, who was in the army from 2004 to 2013 and studied at Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg. In his master’s thesis, he researched the political ideas of army officers. In essence, all of the interviews he conducted as part of his work had the same outcome, “Those questioned see themselves as part of an elite, as heroes, who will go into combat and, if necessary, sacrifice their lives.”

A majority of officers had an extremely conservative outlook and could easily identify with nationalist ideas, particularly in their view of history. “The Blitzkrieg on Poland during World War II was praised by many of my colleagues as a great military achievement,” said Dominik.

According to its own statistics, the MAD is currently reviewing 275 cases under the category of right-wing extremism. These are only those cases where the authorities could not avoid launching formal investigations. Franco A.’s neo-Nazi graduation paper in 2013, which was known to his superiors and the military disciplinary official, for example, was not included in this figure.

In 2016, the research of the MAD uncovered only three instances in which it determined right-wing extremists were involved.

Questions tabled by the Left Party parliamentary group to the government in the Bundestag (parliament) during the past week revealed that several soldiers were allowed to remain in service and had access to weapons after being investigated by the MAD for shouting “Sieg! heil!” or performing the Nazi salute.

The strengthening of right-wing extremist elements in the

army is closely linked to the politics of militarism and rearmament, which have been pursued determinedly by the defence minister.

The army is to be massively rearmed in the coming years, according to the provisional outlines of the concept of the army’s future capability profile drawn up by her ministry. It is to be capable of operating fully on land, at sea, in the air, in space and in cyberspace.

The army’s seven brigades are to be increased to three divisions with eight to 10 brigades. Just within the past week, a contract with arms company Kraussman-Maffei Wegmann was signed for the modernisation of 104 Leopard II tanks. Over the coming six years, the total number of tanks is to rise from 244 to 328.

The air force is to have the capacity to lead a multinational force capable of conducting up to 350 reconnaissance and combat sorties per day. To this end, Tornado fighter jets and CH53 transport helicopters will be replaced with newer aircraft. In addition, drones, C130 Hercules transport aircraft, additional A400M transport planes and heavy transportation helicopters will be purchased. New ships will also be bought for the navy.

The expansion of the Bundeswehr into an army capable of fighting and killing around the world necessarily brings with it the revival of the Wehrmacht’s traditions and creates ideal conditions for neo-Nazi structures.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which has long led the militarist propaganda, made this unmistakably clear. For the FAZ, even the measures proposed by Von der Leyen to cover up the affair go too far. In a comment on Tuesday, the paper described “the search of all service locations for symbols which allegedly violate the constitution” as an “embarrassing exorcism, which will clean up the commander-in-chief, but tarnish the soldiers.”

The army, according to the FAZ, “was constructed by Wehrmacht officers who used and further developed its weaponry and training maxims for decades.” It openly called on the generals to resist their civilian commanders: “If resistance is to be the only creator of tradition—why are the generals going along with this nonsense?”



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