Links established between neo-Nazi network and “Identity Movement” in the German army

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It is becoming increasingly clear that the far-right terrorist cell around First Lieutenant Franco A is part of a broad neo-Nazi network in the German army. This network is evidently linked to the “Identity Movement.”

Last Thursday, the media outlet NDR (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland) reported on an aspiring officer who admitted to having telephone communications with Franco A. The officer candidate is suspected of breaking into a tank at an army training ground in Munster in February of this year and stealing two machine guns and a pistol. It has been determined that he was at the location when the incident occurred.

NDR based its report on information from the parliamentary Defence Committee, which met behind closed doors last Wednesday. The suspect is reportedly a student at the Bundeswehr University in Munich who allegedly had contact with the right-wing extremist “Identity Movement.” The stolen weapons are compatible with the arms found in the possession of Franco A’s suspected accomplice, the student Matthias F.

NDR reported that the aspiring officer exchanged Facebook messages with a second accomplice, Maximilian T, shortly before the theft in Munster. The stolen weapons have not been located.

Army officers Franco A and Maximilian T, as well as the student Matthias F, have been arrested. They are accused of preparing a serious criminal act endangering the state. They allegedly procured weapons and identified potential targets for a terror attack, including former President Joachim Gauck and Justice Minister Heiko Maas. Franco A created a second identity as a Syrian refugee in order to blame such an attack on asylum seekers.

The latest reports confirm that the suspected terrorist cell is part of much more widespread right-wing extremist networks in the army. In addition to the aspiring officer, investigations are ongoing into three other students at the Bundeswehr University in Munich. Soldiers in Bremerhaven, Torgelow (Mecklenburg-Pomerania), Bischofswiesen (Bavaria) and Munster (Lower Saxony) are also being targeted. Some of the suspects are associated with the Identity Movement.

This is a far-right group that espouses cultural racism and has some 400 members in Germany. “Their leading members come from the NPD (National Democratic Party) youth, radical student groups, and even the banned Nazi organisation Loyal Youth for the German Homeland (HDJ),” wrote *Die Zeit*.

No concrete proof of ties between the group and the neo-Nazi network has yet been published. But the group is reportedly extremely active at the Bundeswehr University in Munich where Maximilian T studied. Already in 2011, several media outlets reported that three writers for the new right-wing newspaper *Sezession* had jointly initiated the takeover of the student newspaper *Campus* by the Identity Movement. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, university staff feared “that attempts were being made to saturate the newspaper of the student body with the political agenda of the new right.”

But the three students remained largely untouched and expanded their network in the course of their officer careers. In 2013, they jointly published the book *Soldiery—Searching for the Bundeswehr’s Identity and Vocation Today*, which was celebrated by right-wing extremist newspapers and presented by the authors at

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the Library of Conservatism in Berlin.

One of the three writers, Lieutenant Felix S, is now one of the leading figures in the Identity Movement. He appears in campaign videos, marches in xenophobic demonstrations and publishes on new right web sites. He makes no secret of this.

The soldiery volume was funded by the Foundation of the German Army Association. Neither the Bundeswehr University nor the military Surveillance Service (MAD) responded to requests from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for comment on the matter, pointing to an official cover-up of neo-Nazi forces.

A glance at the list of authors in the book published by the Identity Movement group in Munich demonstrates how far these right-wing networks reach. One author is Marcel Bohnert, a major in the army and a participant in the training programme for the general staff at the Leadership Academy in Hamburg. He has published two militarist books that made headlines because of their anti-democratic tendencies and historical revisionism.

In the 2014 book *Army in Turmoil*, 16 officers wrote about their conception of the army. These officers depict themselves as an elite that stands in contrast to a "hedonist and individualist" society that concentrates on "self-realisation, driven by consumerism, pacifism and egoism." According to the authors, this society has no understanding of "the striving for honour through a great readiness to sacrifice" for a "patriotic ideal of the people and fatherland," and for "courage, loyalty and honour."

Similar theses, together with the explicit covering up of Nazi crimes, were advanced in the 2016 book *The Invisible Veterans*. The book states that the Nazi Blitzkrieg and the "military triumphs" associated with it resulted from the "decisiveness" of the officers involved, whereas in today's Bundeswehr, "the leader who enjoys taking decisions is no longer desired." Instead, "the functioning bureaucrat" is the ideal.

The book continues: "A clientele [is] being targeted for recruitment that is more focused on the blessings of public service than the concept of sacrificing to serve," including a readiness to "lay down one's life." It states further: "The 'warrior instinct' is tossed aside. All that is left is the soul of bureaucrats."

The book advances in opposition to this the ideal of a "spirit" of "readiness to sacrifice, courage and comradeship," which "was to be found in the army until the retirement of those generals forged in the Second World War."

The right-wing cliques reach well beyond the officer corps. The editor of these two volumes was given space for a guest commentary by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* just three days after Franco A's arrest. In it, he warned that one should not demonise "military rigour." "Giving [it] sufficient emphasis in the training of soldiers is an essential precondition for ensuring that they will be able to cope under the hardships of operational reality."

A day after the parliamentary Defence Committee was informed of the possible ties between the terrorist cell and the Identity Movement, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article by Gerald Wagner explicitly defending Major Bohnert's views. He declared that he understood the "military capacity to fight" not in the sense of technology and weaponry, but "rather as the mental superiority of an elite formed for this purpose."

He also explicitly defended Bohnert's two books and the militarist volume published by the right-wing clique from Munich. The officers wanted to "build bridges, without concealing the essence of a special type of soldiery," according to Wagner. The authors considered "the capacity of military force experts to use force responsibly" as the "best means to guard against the excesses in question." That the public was now refusing to "recognise their ability to lead" was a "particularly humiliating disappointment."

The only problem seen by Wagner was that some of these declarations were "accompanied by the unpleasant smell of superiority." He added, regretfully, "The damage is that it makes it much easier for society to avoid the challenge and instead regard terms like nation, honour, loyalty, obedience, valour, elite and fighting spirit as the internal enemy speaking."

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