

New head of German intelligence intends to strengthen the powers of the agency

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At a press conference last Thursday the German Interior, Minister Horst Seehofer, (Christian Social Union, CSU) presented Thomas Haldenwang (Christian Democratic Union), the new president of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV). The change of personnel at the top of the German domestic intelligence service is aimed at strengthening the agency “after the turbulence of the past few weeks,” as Haldenwang put it, and increase surveillance of the population.

Haldenwang’s predecessor, Hans-Georg Maassen, was retired by Seehofer at the beginning of November after publicly backing demonstrations and pogroms by radical right-wingers in the city of Chemnitz. Maassen described violent attacks on immigrants, leftists and a Jewish restaurant as “fake news.” Speaking at a meeting of heads of European domestic intelligence services on January 18 in Warsaw, Maassen went so far as to accuse “leftist radical forces in the SPD” of forcing him out of office.

Haldenwang was the longtime vice president of the BfV, and his appointment as Maassen’s successor confirms that Germany’s ruling grand coalition (CDU, CSU and Social Democratic Party, SPD) will continue to back the right-wing extremist course of the agency. Even more clearly than Maassen, Haldenwang embodies the fascist traditions of the BfV. He was already working for the agency when the far-right NSU terror gang was exposed at the end of 2011 when dozens of BfV undercover agents were revealed to have been active in the neo-Nazi circles surrounding the NSU. At the time Haldenwang headed the BfV’s central department until he was appointed BfV vice president under Maassen in August 2013.

At Thursday’s press conference Seehofer stated he was “convinced that Mr. Haldenwang will continue the successful work of the Federal Office and with him we can return to objective and trustworthy work.” Haldenwang has “for years been in close and trusting dialogue with the different state offices for the protection of the constitution,” and he “is confident that the Federal Office with him as leader will intensively continue the important exchange in

this connection with the states.”

The new BfV president left no doubt what is meant by “objective and trustworthy work.” Asked by a journalist what links him to his predecessor Hans-Georg Maassen, he explained: “I am linked to my predecessor in that we worked together in a spirit of trust for five years and had a high degree of agreement on the key technical issues of our office.” When asked what set him apart from Maassen, he answered provocatively: “What makes me different? I have red glasses and I do not wear a waistcoat.”

The conclusion is obvious. In the past few years Maassen has transformed the BfV into a political instrument that colluded openly with the far right and classified any left-wing critique of capitalism and the right-wing politics of the established parties as “left-wing extremism” and “anti-constitutional.” The clearest example is the current BfV annual report. While the Alternative for Germany, AfD, and its right-wing extremist milieu are referred to merely as “victims” of alleged “left-wing extremists,” the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) is listed as a “left-wing extremist party” and “subject for surveillance.”

Haldenwang has been appointed BfV president by the grand coalition to continue this course, without identifying himself so openly with the far right as Maassen did—at least to the outside world. In a public hearing of the presidents of the intelligence services in the Parliamentary Oversight Panel (PKGr) last Friday, Haldenwang even announced the “expansion of the area of combating and dealing with right-wing extremism.” However his remarks made clear that this means above all the massive expansion of the censorship of the internet.

“Social media plays a special role in the development of extremism,” Haldenwang said. The BfV must therefore “keep its eye on social media, which can act both as a stimulant and as a crime scene.” It has “never been so easy to celebrate hate and violent fantasies while remaining anonymous.” It was therefore important “to remind social media operators of their social responsibility and demand better cooperation with the security authorities.”

Such censorship measures are directed primarily at leftist web sites and organisations that are already massively repressed. “Ladies and gentlemen, left-wing extremists are also increasing their organisational and campaigning potential through social networks and digital platforms,” Haldenwang told the assembled representatives of all Bundestag parties. The BfV had observed “the clear strategy of taking up real and imagined social grievances, and seeking out democratic forms of protest to then influence them in an extremist manner.”

Anyone who takes up real social ills, participates in democratic protests and fights for a socialist perspective is therefore, according to Haldenwang, a “left-wing extremist” and must be censored!

The fight against “left-wing extremism” goes hand in hand with xenophobia and racism. In the “sphere of extremism of foreigners” he could “in principle report the same,” Halderwang said. “Here too” the relevant groups used “digital means of communication for organizing, mobilizing and propaganda.” The “conclusion” could only be “that there can be no understanding or tolerance for any extremist group in Germany.”

In order to perfect mass surveillance, Haldenwang called for further centralization of the various intelligence services. He wanted to “emphasize that we must also develop organisationally and not lose sight of the strong central function of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.” Together with the state offices for protection of the constitution he would “push for a more intensive coordination by the BfV based on respective potentials.” What was needed were “effective and well-established security agencies.”

What Haldenwang is striving for is total monitoring of the internet, including encrypted communication. “We need to meet the technological challenges of the digital age and be technologically up to date,” he said. This requires “not only further recruitment of qualified IT staff and sufficient financial resources, but also social acceptance of legal rights corresponding to the current life world.”

For example, in the case of “telecommunications surveillance,” he “wants to get a grip on the problem of “going dark.” Despite “increasing amounts of data as a result of digitization,” intelligence agencies “now gained less information about a person than they did in previous analog times because the bulk of information can no longer be captured and evaluated,” he complained. “Encryption and methods of preserving anonymity” have had “a positive effect on security and data protection,” but have “also led to a massive loss of intelligence for intelligence services.”

In the course of the PKGr hearing the intelligence chiefs sought to outdo one another with demands for rearmament

and surveillance. “If the preparation, planning and execution of extremist activities are increasingly carried out with digital media and transferred to cyberspace, we must also ensure that we can also adequately investigate anti-constitutional activities there,” Haldenwang warned.

The president of the foreign intelligence service (BND), Bruno Kahl, openly advocated so-called “hack-backs,” i.e. offensive cyber-war measures, in order to preemptively “render tools for attack harmless ... in any way whatsoever.”

The German secret services can only operate so aggressively and draw from the traditions of the Nazis and Gestapo because no one in official politics opposes them. Under conditions of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, the German ruling class is closing ranks and, as was the case in the past, installing a right-wing, authoritarian regime to enforce its policy of militarism and social counterrevolution in the face of growing opposition.

The so-called “left-wing” opposition parties, in particular, are coming forward as submissive stooges of the state police and intelligence apparatus. The Green MEP Konstantin von Notz praised Haldenwang in the highest tones even before his appointment was announced. “I’m looking forward to working with you,” he said. “I wish the new president a good hand to tackle things with determination and restore lost confidence.”

On behalf of the leadership of the Left Party and representing it in the PKGr, André Hahn wished Haldenwang “a happy hand in your work. You will certainly be more open and open-minded to Parliament than your predecessor,” he added. In fact, the Left Party had also supported Maassen from the start. Shortly after he took office in 2013, the party invited him to a public meeting to discuss measures to “strengthen” the agency.



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