

What is the German secret service concealing about the Lübcke murder?

Dietmar Gaisenkersting
6 August 2019

The Kassel public prosecutor has confirmed that Stephan Ernst, strongly suspected of murdering Kassel District President Walter Lübcke, may have made another murder attempt more than three years ago. This new suspicion provided grounds for the police to raid Ernst's house again on 25 July.

In the hitherto unexplained case, a 22-year-old Iraqi asylum-seeker was attacked with a knife on 6 January 2016 near the Lohfelden refugee shelter, and was seriously injured. The unidentified culprit escaped on a bicycle.

Ernst lived just 2.5 kilometres from the refugee shelter. The facility was the site of a town hall meeting two-and-a-half months earlier at which Lübcke countered the shouts of right-wingers who attacked him for providing refugee accommodation. According to the news weekly *Der Spiegel*, Ernst is the man in a video of the meeting shouting at Lübcke, "I can't believe it" and "Get lost." This video was used to launch a hate campaign on the internet against Lübcke, which included death threats.

When Ernst was identified as a criminal suspect based on DNA evidence found at the scene of Lübcke's murder and gave a detailed confession—since withdrawn—it was said that the right-wing extremist, who had been convicted several times before, had disappeared from the radar of the intelligence agencies 10 years ago because he was no longer politically active. The intelligence file on Ernst, which had been available in 2016 to the Committee of Inquiry of the Hesse state parliament into the neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground (NSU), has since been closed in the Intelligence Information System (NADIS) of the investigative authorities, allegedly because there has been nothing against Ernst for 10 years.

But there are increasing indications that Ernst has been active in the militant neo-Nazi scene over the last decade. His public appearance on 14 October 2015 at the town hall meeting in Lohfelden, and the suspicion that he was responsible for the attack on the Iraqi asylum-seeker, are only the latest evidence.

The claim that the security authorities knew nothing about him is not credible. The neo-Nazi scene is riddled with confidential informants (CI), and the meeting in Lohfelden that resulted in death threats against the district president was probably being observed by the secret service. This raises the question of whether Ernst dropped off the radar of the security authorities for reasons other than those officially stated.

In the 1990s, Ernst, who is now 45 years old, repeatedly faced trial for violent assaults and terrorist attacks on immigrants. In

1995 he was sentenced to six years in prison without parole. After his release, he became part of a network that had close ties to the NSU, which murdered nine migrants and a police officer between 2000 and 2007.

At the beginning of the 2000s, Ernst appeared several times at far-right German National Party (NDP) events with Mike Sawallich, who at that time was head of the Hesse Young Nationalists (JN), the NPD youth organization. Sawallich also belonged to the inner circle of the "Oidoxie Street Fighting Crew." This group regarded itself as a German offshoot of the extreme right-wing terrorist "Combat 18" terrorist network, and maintained close ties and gave practical support to the NSU. Not three weeks after the murder of Lübcke, Sawallich posted a photo on Facebook showing him as a youth arm in arm with Ernst, his "best comrade."

Ernst probably got to know NSU members Uwe Bönnhardt, Uwe Mundlos, and (according to the *Bild* newspaper) "probably also Beate Zschäpe" personally in 2006. At that time, these three were said to have attended Stanley Röske's 30th birthday party in Kassel. Röske, today a leading member of the German "Combat 18" offshoot, has known Ernst at least since 2002.

"Combat 18" has since distanced itself from Ernst for reasons that are unclear. At the end of June, a video by the group appeared on the internet in which a hooded person denied Ernst's contact with the group. The anti-fascist research platform *Exif* has identified the speaker as Robin Schmiemann, a well-known right-wing extremist from Dortmund and a pen pal of Beate Zschäpe.

It should be noted that shortly after Röske's birthday party, the ninth NSU victim, Halit Yozgat, was shot in a Kassel internet café. Present at the murder was the Hesse state secret service officer Andreas Temme. Shortly before the murder of Yozgat, Temme, a CI handler, had phoned his informant in the Kassel neo-Nazi scene, Benjamin Gärtner. In February 2016, as a witness before the Hesse state parliament Committee of Inquiry into the NSU, Gärtner had confirmed that he knew Ernst as "NPD-Stephan."

In the Munich NSU trial and before parliamentary committees of inquiry Temme appeared as a witness, but the then-Hesse state interior minister and current state premier Volker Bouffier, a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and a friend of Lübcke, refused to grant him full clearance to testify.

After the murder of Yozgat, Temme was transferred from the Hesse state secret service to the district presidency of Lübcke, where he still works today.

In his initial confession to the murder of Lübcke, Ernst implicated two other people, whom the investigators arrested. Sixty-four-year-old Elmar J. from Höxter was said to have sold Ernst the murder weapon in 2016. Forty-three-year-old Markus Hartmann from Kassel was said to have been the intermediary in this deal and other arms purchases by Ernst, including an Uzi submachine gun, from 2014 onwards.

Hartmann is a long-standing right-wing extremist who is known to the authorities. He is originally from Rudolstadt, the same area in Thuringia where the NSU began, and where he was active in the right-wing extremist scene from 1990. In 2006, Hartmann was already in Kassel, where he might have been the local connection to the NSU. Questioned by the police, he said he knew the murder victim Halit Yozgat “fleetingly.” Because he provided an alibi the investigators regarded this possible lead as a dead end.

Hartmann was with Ernst and Sawallich during an attack on the 2009 May Day trade union demonstration in Dortmund, where several hundred neo-Nazis threw stones and wooden slats at the participants. Because of this attack, Hartmann and Ernst were arrested. While the Dortmund District Court sentenced Ernst to seven months in prison on probation, Hartmann walked away without any penalty.

After this sentencing Ernst allegedly remained inconspicuous, the secret services now claim. In fact, he continued to move in the same circles as before. Until at least 2011, he was a member of several extreme right-wing groups, such as the “*Artgemeinschaft Germanic Faith Community*,” a neo-pagan and neo-Nazi organization founded in 1951 by former SS member Wilhelm Kusserow, and the neo-Nazi group “*Freier Widerstand Kassel*” (Free Resistance Kassel).

In the 2016 election campaign, Ernst donated 150 euros to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). On the internet, he agitates against foreigners and the government under the pseudonym “Game Over.” In 2018 on YouTube he threatened, “Either this government will abdicate shortly, or there will be deaths.” Together with Hartmann, Ernst was a member of the Sandershausen shooting club.

Mehmet Daimagüler, a lawyer for NSU victims, points out that Lübcke’s cold-blooded murder has parallels with the NSU murders. The NSU victims were also shot with a pistol from close range. And Lübcke too was said to have been on the death list of the NSU when it went to ground in 2011, i.e., long before the internet witch-hunt against him in 2015.

As with the NSU, the facts available to date, despite all the supposed “glitches,” “mistakes” and “sloppiness” on the part of the authorities, provide a clear picture. A right-wing and violent neo-Nazi committed one criminal offence after another since his youth, and was eventually sentenced to several years’ imprisonment in 1995. Free again, he re-joined the neo-Nazi scene, became part of the NSU supporters circle in Kassel, and only 10 years later, in 2009, received another prison sentence. Then something happened that supposedly made him act with more restraint.

Thomas Haldenwang, the president of the federal *Verfassungsschutz* (Office for the Protection of the Constitution), as Germany’s national secret service is called, has emphasized

that Ernst was not a confidential informant. He moved in an environment of CIs, who are currently being questioned, but since 2010 the *Verfassungsschutz* no longer had a personal file on him, Haldenwang claims. He was no longer classified as a right-wing extremist, and, according to information from the security authorities, neither the police nor the secret service had placed him under surveillance.

In contrast, the Hesse state secret service regarded Ernst and Hartmann in 2015 as violent right-wing extremists. The latter was also recorded as being a supporter of the right-wing group “*Freier Widerstand Kassel*.”

Just as with the NSU, here also the secret service is stonewalling. The Hesse state government, led by former Interior Minister Volker Bouffier, has decided to keep the NSU files of the Hesse secret service under lock and key until 2044.

These files also contain the record of the questioning of the CI Benjamin Gärtner in 2016 on his knowledge of Ernst and his contacts. Gärtner refused to talk to *Spiegel TV* because he had been “muzzled.” He said, “I got a muzzle back then and I do not know what would happen to me if I dropped my muzzle. I do not know how long I’ll be sitting here at home.” Asked what he was afraid of, Gärtner replied, “The government.”

In an earlier article, we raised the question of whether Walter Lübcke had been murdered, not for his refugee-friendly attitude, but for some other reason, and whether it could be that “Lübcke knew too much and had become an obstacle to the far-right cliques?”

Regardless of what Lübcke knew or did not know, however, his murder is a warning to anyone coming too close to the right-wing cliques within the state apparatus. It would have been expected that the murder of a high-ranking state official and CDU politician by a neo-Nazi would have triggered an intense investigation, using all the intelligence available to the secret services to uncover those responsible. Nothing like that has happened.

Relevant secret service files, which could clarify the background to the murder, will remain closed for decades. Nobody is to dare to seek to uncover the intertwining of the intelligence services, security apparatus, AfD and right-wing terrorism. This is accepted by the political establishment, which says a great deal about the extent of the right-wing conspiracy within the state apparatus.



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