

Germany: Trial begins in murder of CDU politician Walter Lübcke

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On June 16, the murder trial against Stephan Ernst and Markus Hartmann began in the Frankfurt Higher Regional Court, chaired by Judge Thomas Sagebiel. The 46-year-old neo-Nazi Ernst is accused of having shot Kassel District President Walter Lübcke (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) on his terrace a year ago, on the night of June 2, 2019.

His colleague at work, Hartmann, who shares his ideological convictions, is accused of being an accessory to murder. He is said to have procured Ernst's contact with the arms dealer from whom he bought the murder weapon and giving him psychological aid to commit the murder, "among other things through joint shooting exercises in forests and shooting clubs in the years 2016 to 2018."

Ernst is also accused of having stabbed and seriously injured the refugee Ahmed I. from Iraq in January 2016. Along with the Lübcke family, Ahmed I. is appearing as a joint plaintiff.

In the run-up to and at the beginning of the trial there was much talk about the radicalization of Ernst, which ostensibly began after Lübcke advocated that Germany accept refugees at a citizens' meeting in 2015. Ernst and Hartmann, who were both present, interrupted his speech and broadcast a video of the meeting on YouTube, which was shared by right-wingers and led to hate mail and death threats against the district president.

The media has written a great deal about the role of social media and hate mail. The question of Ernst's backers and accomplices is left out. There is a militant neo-Nazi scene in Kassel, in which Ernst and Hartmann were active for decades. It is closely intertwined with the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, as the German secret service is called.

But the charges laid by the chief federal prosecutor exclude all connections to backers and state authorities. What role the neo-Nazi scene and the secret service played in the murder of Lübcke is not addressed, nor is the question of whether there were other motives for the murder. Did Lübcke possibly have to die because he knew things he should not have known?

In recent years, it has become public knowledge that parts of the state apparatus, in particular the secret service, police and Bundeswehr (armed forces), are covering up and expanding neo-Nazi structures. Shielded from the public, an extreme right-wing "shadow army" is being built up, consisting of elite KSK

(Kommando Spezialkräfte) soldiers, police officers from special units, judges, lawyers and secret service operatives, who are preparing to kill political opponents on so-called "day X."

A video was shown at the trial last Thursday of Ernst's first interrogation on June 25, 2019, in which he had made a full confession, which he later recanted. In it, Ernst expresses himself as being completely in line with this right-wing conspiracy. "There's no harm in arming people to be prepared," he says. "Our intention was to liberate Germany."

It is a fact that the right-wing terrorist networks have been supported for years by high-ranking elements in the state apparatus, especially in the secret services. This also applies to the two defendants in the Lübcke murder case.

Ernst did not become radicalized simply in 2015 after Lübcke spoke at the citizens' assembly. For as long as he has been able to think politically, he has terrorized people who do not fit into his racist world view.

As early as 1989, at the age of 15, he tried to set fire to an apartment building that was mainly inhabited by families of Turkish origin. Three years later, in 1992, he stabbed an imam in a public bathroom. The man collapsed with life-threatening injuries, but was saved. In 1993, Ernst tried to kill as many people as possible in a refugee home using a homemade pipe bomb.

At that time, he was arrested and sentenced to six years in juvenile detention for assault, arson and attempted murder. While in custody, he beat up another inmate of Turkish origin. Ernst was 21 years old at the time.

In the court proceedings at the time, news weekly *Der Spiegel* reported that an expert had diagnosed him as having a "severe mental abnormality," including "sociopathy," which led to diminished criminal responsibility. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* cited the reasons for the judgement: Ernst "found it particularly burdensome that the witness [the stabbed imam] was recognisably a foreigner."

At the turn of the millennium, after four years in prison, Ernst continued as before and immediately became part of the Kassel neo-Nazi scene again. In February 2003, he was suspected of having committed an attack on a teacher who was active against the far-right. However, the evidence was insufficient for an indictment.

On 1 May 2009, Ernst and Hartmann, together with about 400 right-wing thugs, attacked the May Day rally of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) in Dortmund, using stones and wooden slats. As a result, the Dortmund District Court sentenced Ernst to seven months in prison in 2010. Hartmann went unpunished.

The secret service claims that Ernst and Hartmann have not been conspicuous since then and therefore had not been subject to further surveillance. This is demonstrably untrue. The two were an integral part of the Kassel neo-Nazi scene, took part in right-wing demonstrations, and posted their racist agitation on the internet. Ernst donated €150 to the Thuringian regional association of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), led by Björn Höcke.

A photo shows both on September 1, 2018 in Chemnitz at a demonstration of the AfD and neo-Nazis, where fascists hunted down foreigners, something denied by the then-head of the secret service, Hans-Georg Maassen.

The Hesse state Office for the Protection of the Constitution always had them “on the radar.” Nevertheless, Ernst and Hartmann were able to meticulously prepare the murder of Lübcke.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* writes that Ernst “encircled and observed his victim.” It adds that “he spent whole nights on weekends around the house of Lübcke.” Ernst is said to have driven twice with his pistol to Lübcke’s house before he finally shot him in cold blood.

Hartmann received a gun license in 2015 thanks to the help of the Hesse secret service. There is strong suspicion that he was one of the seven confidential informants (CI) that the Hesse secret service maintained within the Kassel neo-Nazi scene.

This scene demonstrably had contacts with the neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground (NSU), which murdered nine immigrants and one policewoman between 2000 and 2007. In Kassel, the NSU shot the young Halit Yozgat in 2006.

Hartmann himself originally comes from Rudolstadt, the same area in Thuringia where the NSU originated. He had already been active in the right-wing extremist scene there. In 2006, at the time of the murder of Halit Yozgat, he was already in Kassel. It is highly probable that Ernst met the NSU members personally in 2006, shortly before the murder of 21-year-old Yozgat.

A key figure in this neo-Nazi network is Andreas Temme, an employee of the Hesse State Office for the Protection of the Constitution who directed CIs in the right-wing extremist scene in Kassel, possibly including Hartmann. Temme was at the scene of Yozgat’s murder. Later he moved to Walter Lübcke’s regional office, where he still works today.

It is virtually certain that Hartmann has connections to the state apparatus. According to research by the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, the unregistered shooting club “SSG Germania Cassel,” at whose shooting range Ernst and Hartmann trained, is considered a community for reservists.

Der Spiegel has also recently reported that investigators found a photographed document from the Hesse University for Police and Administration on Hartmann’s mobile phone, which was marked “classified information—for official use only.” It was a police training document that dealt with searches in cases of “violent terrorist crimes of nationwide importance.” It is not yet clear who gave the internal document to the neo-Nazi.

Although this was the first time in the post-World War II history of Germany that a politician was murdered by right-wing terrorists, the state authorities were intent on concealing the real background to Lübcke’s murder from the outset.

This began immediately after the murder, when Sabine Thureau, president of the Hesse State Office for Criminal Investigation, claimed that his murder had nothing to do with the right-wing propaganda directed against Lübcke. Now, the prosecution is ignoring connections to possible backers and state authorities.

The Hesse state government, led by former Interior Minister Volker Bouffier (CDU), 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 2016 interrogation of the CI Gärtner, operated by Temme, which would likely include his knowledge of Ernst and the latter’s contacts.

As in the NSU trial in Munich, reporting on the trial in Frankfurt is being made difficult. Of the approximately 200 journalists who have sought accreditation for the trial, less than a third can attend the court sessions. Due to coronavirus regulations, only 19 people are allowed into the courtroom.

A further 41 journalists can listen to the audio transmission in an adjacent room. The media representatives present are not allowed to carry technical equipment such as laptops or smart phones. The rental of a larger room or even an exhibition hall, as in the Loveparade trial in Düsseldorf, was rejected.

It is already apparent that as in the Munich NSU trial, neither the attorney general nor the court will pursue questions that would shed light on the obvious conspiracy within the state apparatus and its contacts with the neo-Nazi scene.



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