Belgian neo-Nazi fugitive officer Jurgen Conings monitored for years by intelligence agencies

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Jürgen Conings, the 46-year-old right-wing extremist and career soldier who plotted to carry out the assassination of high-profile coronavirus virologists and other government targets, remains at large almost three weeks after he disappeared.

A manhunt is still underway by police and military forces, concentrated largely in the Haute Campine parklands.

Conings went into hiding on May 17, taking with him an unknown quantity of arms. Anti-tank missiles were already discovered in his abandoned car, and he is presumed to be armed and preparing a potential terrorist attack. Upon his disappearance, Conings left behind letters to his wife and the police, denouncing coronavirus lockdown restrictions and declaring that he was prepared to die to fight them.

The high-profile national virologist and government advisor Marc Van Ranst remains in police protection along with his family. It is known that Conings had targeted Van Ranst beginning at least a year ago, and spent several hours outside the latter's home the night he disappeared.

It is now known that in 2020, Conings was a member of the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang ("Flemish Importance"). According to a May 28 report by *Standaard*, he also provided arms training to a fascist militia named Vlaams Legioen, (Flemish Legion), which takes its name from Belgian forces who fought with the Nazis in World War II.

The Conings events have developed into a political crisis for the Belgian government. There is continuing speculation that Defense Minister Ludivine Dodender may be compelled to resign.

The official explanation for what has taken place, that Conings was acting as a lone individual, and that the failure to act upon the many warnings of his terrorist plots was due to a breakdown in communication in the security agencies, is completely untenable.

Using his position as an arms training officer, with access to munitions and arms depots, Conings amassed an arsenal for himself. On June 1, the national public broadcaster RTL published an interview with a former commando and special forces officer, who explained anonymously that the existing security protocols mean it is impossible for anyone to do this while acting alone.

"There must have been accomplices," he said, as the monitoring of arms is strict. "If a weapon is not returned, the depot warns the security officer of the battalion, who takes measures such as closing the gate to the barracks while awaiting the return of all the weapons," he said. It was nothing like stealing a key. "There you are entering into fantasy. It's not a key to a letterbox."

The fact that Conings has been able to disappear into the forest with presumably heavy arms and ammunition also showed that he has had assistance, the retired officer added. In his experience, the Belgian army command had a lax attitude toward neo-Nazi ideology among soldiers. "An adjutant wore tattoos of neo-Nazis on his arm, without the least investigation," he said.

More information has continued to surface in recent weeks showing that Conings had been closely tracked by multiple intelligence agencies for years, but that precautionary actions were either delayed or simply prevented by sections of the intelligence apparatus itself.

Le Soir published a more detailed chronology based on an internal government hearing that its reporters attended. Conings was first identified by the intelligence agencies in 2015, after he made a donation to a Christians of the Orient organization. In 2018, intelligence agencies took note that he participated in an as-yet undisclosed extreme

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right organization.

Between 2017 and 2019, Conings faced criminal charges, including one for "possession of a prohibited weapon" and another for "threats."

At the beginning of 2020, he published racist statements on Facebook. The defense department formally filed charges against him. However, the prosecution then opted to drop the charges and not proceed further. There has been as yet no public explanation for this.

In June-July 2020, intelligence agencies picked up the fact that Conings had performed a Google search for the home of the virologist Van Ranst, i.e., that he had chosen his target almost a year in advance.

In August 2020, the anti-terrorist OCAM (Organ for the Coordination of the Analysis of Threats) opened a pre-investigation into Conings for "extremism."

On August 31, 2020, military intelligence (SGRS—*Service général du renseignement et de la sécurité*), decided to revoke Conings' security clearance. Conings had very high level access, officially classed as "secret," giving him access to secure and sensitive sites and to arms stores. It is Belgium's second-highest security level, below "very secret." Yet it would take two months, until November 12, even for the revoking of his security clearance to be acted upon.

At the beginning of 2021, OCAM completed its investigation, marking him as a "potentially violent extremist." On February 17, 2021, it increased its risk evaluation of Conings to Level 3, the second-highest level, meaning that the risk is "grave," "possible and realistic."

OCAM's evaluation is transferred automatically to all the military and intelligence branches tied to it, including the SGRS. Only five months earlier, the SGRS had itself concluded from its own investigation that Conings' security clearance should be revoked. Yet inexpicably, the SGRS, which is allegedly responsible for monitoring extremism in the military, took no action in response to OCAM's designation.

Defense Minister Dodender claimed that neither she nor SGRS Director Philippe Boucké were ever informed of OCAM's evaluation. *Le Soir* cited an anonymous source as stating: "At the SGRS, no one moved. The information was not passed up, not translated, and no investigation was launched. The SGRS certainly had the information, but it completely neglected the follow-up of this information."

Assuming Dedonder's statement is true, the most obvious reasonable explanation is that a decision was taken by others in the SGRS that no further action should be taken against Conings.

Conings himself is a lifelong soldier. He joined the Belgian army at the age of 18 in 1992. He became a gunner and sniper. He was deployed in multiple missions, before eventually being transferred to military police. It has not been reported where Conings was deployed, but over this period Belgium sent forces to participate in the interventions in Afghanistan and Libya. The neo-colonial character of these wars provides ideal grounds for the promotion of fascist ideology and the development of far-right networks.

This is by no means confined to Belgium. Late last month in Germany, the trial began of Franco A., a right-wing extremist in the Bundeswehr. Using a fake identity of a refugee, he is alleged to have planned terrorist attacks on politicians and public institutions.

As the WSWS noted, he was "part of a network of elite soldiers, special police officers and state officials whose leading figures remain at large despite having committed serious weapons offenses. Members of the network made far-reaching preparations for an armed coup on a 'Day X' and, in the course of this, planned the detention and murder of politicians, civil rights activists and refugee aid workers." Despite his longstanding and documented fascist views, he rose to the rank of first lieutenant.

In France itself, where a network of former and active military generals and officers recently published open letters pledging their readiness to launch a military putsch and kill thousands in a civil war, there is a documented neo-Nazi network. In March, using only publicly-available information from social media, *Mediapart* published evidence of more than 50 individuals in the army who published openly neo-Nazi statements.

Whether it is in France, Belgium, Germany, Spain or elsewhere, the existence of these networks, which are able to operate and develop with relative impunity throughout the state apparatus and army, is systematically covered up by authorities.

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