

Trial of far-right German soldier gets under way

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On May 20, the trial of Franco A., a key figure in the right-wing extremist network within Germany's state apparatus, got underway in the Senate for State Protection at the Frankfurt Regional High Court.

The state prosecutor has accused the 32-year-old first lieutenant in the Bundeswehr (German Army) of preparing an attack that would have posed a serious threat to the state, i.e., a terrorist attack. The indictment charges that the defendant planned to carry out the attack while posing as a refugee.

Franco A. is also accused of breaching firearms regulations as well as laws controlling military-grade weapons and explosives. He is also charged with fraud and theft. The trial is expected to last until the end of October.

The accused allegedly planned and prepared an attack on the human rights activist Annetta Kahane, a figure targeted by the neo-Nazi far-right. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (Social Democratic Party—SPD) and the vice president of the German parliament, Claudia Roth (Greens), were allegedly also possible targets.

Franco A. was arrested in early 2017 as he sought to remove a weapon from a secret stash in a disabled toilet at Vienna airport. When his fingerprints were taken, it was discovered that he was leading a double life. He served as an officer in the German-French brigade in Illkirch, Alsace, but was also registered under the name David Benjamin as a Syrian refugee. He was allocated an apartment in Erding in Bavaria and approved for social welfare payments.

More than 1,000 rounds of ammunition and 51 explosive devices were subsequently found in his cellar. The soldier was an expert in weapons and combat techniques. He previously went through an eight-year training course in jungle combat. He learned how to plan commando operations, ambushes and surprise attacks.

Despite the seriousness of the charges, Franco A. is a free man. Germany's Federal Court overturned the arrest warrant against him in the autumn of 2017.

In 2018, the Frankfurt Regional High Court refused to hear the charges against Franco A. The court justified this by claiming that he had more than seven months to carry out his attack. As he had not done so, there was no adequate basis for the accusations, the court asserted. It took an appeal from the

state prosecutor to the Federal Court to compel the Frankfurt Regional High Court to bring the case to trial.

It is significant that the charges avoid referring to the “formation of a terrorist association,” although there is evidence that Franco A. had accomplices. As was the case in the trials of the National Socialist Underground (NSU) and the murderer of politician Walter Lübcke, the myth of a “lone wolf” or “a few bad apples” is being asserted, even though there is a wide-ranging neo-Nazi network in the military and state apparatus with which Franco A. has close ties.

During the first days of the trial, Franco A. behaved with a considerable degree of self-confidence and cynicism. He used the courtroom for right-wing extremist propaganda. He accused German Chancellor Angela Merkel of breaking her pledge of office that requires her to protect her people from harm, because in 2015 she allowed thousands of refugees to enter the country. He said he posed as a refugee to find out first-hand how the asylum system in Germany is being abused. This was the act, he declared, of a “courageous civilian and citizen.”

Franco A. rejected the allegations that he was a right-wing extremist and had planned terrorist attacks. He avoided answering questions about the origins and purpose of his weaponry.

Prior to the trial, Franco A. gave extensive interviews to the *New York Times*, *Le Figaro* and the “Russia Today” television channel. During breaks in the trial, he addressed the media.

“He evidently feels very secure,” remarked Annette Ramelsberger, the court reporter for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Secure in the knowledge, one must add, that his backers in the state apparatus will not hang him out to dry.

The defence also conducted itself extremely aggressively. As the trial began, it described the proceedings as character assassination, a hate campaign and stigmatisation of the accused. Defence lawyer Moritz Schmitt-Fricke elaborated on this position by declaring that the federal government “in a quasi-autocratic manner” let too many refugees into the country and now wished to hold the person to account who had tried to draw attention to this wrong.

The defence sought to counter the prosecutor's accusation that Franco A. has had “a Volkish-nationalist and racist outlook for several years,” and harbours “a special dislike for people of

the Jewish faith.” Toward this end, he presented dozens of statements from family members, friends, acquaintances and former teachers. The accused is cosmopolitan, has an intense sense of justice, is “very conservative, but by no means militant,” they claimed. Without a basic commitment to democracy, he would “never have become an officer in the German Army,” they added.

However, many of the people cited by the defence are themselves from the far-right milieu. And numerous documents attest to Franco A.’s racist and nationalist outlook.

His master’s thesis, which he submitted to the Saint-Cyr French military university in 2014, was rejected on the basis that it was a “radical nationalist, racist appeal.” In it, Franco A. advanced the ideal of a homogeneous people with a single people’s will, to which the individual must subordinate himself. He opposed “mixed marriages” and denounced equality for women on the grounds that it “distorts” the role of the woman and damages the family. He attacked the United Nations’ Human Rights Charter and made openly anti-Semitic statements. He praised British Holocaust denier David Irving and blustered about a global Jewish conspiracy.

Franco A.’s obvious right-wing extremist views were covered up by his German superiors at the time, who promoted his military career.

Franco A.’s practice of documenting his appearances and ideas in pictures and recordings also confirms his right-wing extremist views. Over 33,000 chat messages, videos and audio recordings reveal the internal life of a neo-Nazi. He speaks in monologues about foreigners who want to murder Germans and concludes that he must kill them first. One of his friends calls in a chat message for a nuclear bomb to be used on refugees. Franco A. responds, “Keep note of that for later.”

Among the 129 recordings found on Franco A.’s phone are self-composed songs, radio extracts and speeches and addresses to soldiers that Franco A. intends to deliver one day. In addition, audio memos reveal his anti-Semitic and nationalist views. Extracts from these were read out by the prosecution last week. They included statements such as, “Jews and Germans are not the same people,” and “Hitler stands above everything.”

Franco A. admitted to the court that along with the pistol concealed in Vienna, he possesses three additional high-performance, illegal weapons, but he refused to say where he got them and where they currently are. One of the weapons is a G3 rapid-fire machine gun, which is used by the German army as a standard weapon.

He justified his possession of the weapons by saying he was preparing for a potential crisis, such as a conflict of Western European states with Russia or with Islamic State fighters. For this reason, he said, he joined the South chat group run by the former Special Forces soldier Andre S.

The South chat group is part of the so-called “Hannibal Network,” where dozens of elite soldiers and police officers have gathered to hoard weapons, draft death lists and prepare

for “Day X,” on which political opponents are to be rounded up and murdered. Andre S. (alias Hannibal), who built the network, has neither been arrested nor charged. As in the case of Franco A., the Frankfurt Regional High Court found that there was not adequate evidence to support a suspicion of terrorism. The state prosecutor is continuing to consider possible charges.

It also emerged in court that Franco A. used numerous email and telephone identities. He justified this by referring to the prospect of a breakdown in public order.

The fact that Franco A. planned terrorist attacks under the false identity of a refugee is strongly suggested by lists and notes he authored. He wrote, among other things: “Antifa group: have an asylum seeker throw a grenade, then film it;” “blow up the Rothschild Stone in FFM (Frankfurt am Main);” and, “If we wait any longer, then they will have robots, and then it won’t matter if we can win the people to us.”

In court, Franco A. claimed he could no longer remember some of the notes, and he justified others with absurd arguments. He said, for example, that during his school days he was very interested in cinema, and the refugee with a grenade was merely an idea for a film.

Annetta Kahane, on whom Franco A. spied as a potential target, declared in a statement prior to the legal proceedings: “The trial should be understood as an opportunity to uncover armed networks and thoroughly root them out. Unfortunately, after all the experiences of recent years, our expectations are very low.”

In the Munich NSU trial and the Frankfurt trial for the murder of Lübcke, the courts did everything they could to conceal the far-right cliques within the state apparatus. While the immediate perpetrators were punished, their backers in the political establishment, the judiciary, the police and the intelligence agencies remained untouched.



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