

New neo-Nazi weapons cache discovered in Austria

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A huge cache of weapons was uncovered recently by security officers during a house search of a suspected neo-Nazi in the Lower Austrian district of Baden. This is the third such weapons cache found within a year and underlines the extent of far-right terrorist activities in the Central Alps.

During the search, 1,200 kilograms of ammunition, several machine guns and submachine guns, an assault rifle, a sniper rifle and more than 20 other weapons were seized. The weapons inventory also included 17 revolvers and pistols, seven partially operational pipe bombs, 21 so-called “shooting pens” brass knuckles, Asian close combat weapons and other weapons designed to inflict cuts and stabbing wounds.

In addition to weapons and explosives, the security forces also found a large number of Nazi devotional objects. These included steel helmets with swastikas, medals, a bust of Erwin Rommel, Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and other National Socialist literature. According to the Minister of the Interior, Karl Nehammer (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP), the discovery of the weapons held by right-wing extremists was capable of “plunging the Republic into a massive crisis.”

Despite the considerable size of the weapons cache, only a temporary weapons ban was issued against the 53-year-old neo-Nazi Peter Binder and his wife while charges were filed. Both currently remain at large, although the pair are regarded to be part of an extensive far-right terrorist network. The official investigation into their backers and accomplices continues.

Interior Minister Nehammer congratulated the investigators of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BVT): “The consistent action against right-wing extremism is not only part of our historical responsibility, but also a very clear commitment to our democratic coexistence in Austria.”

In fact, numerous far-right extremists have been able to build their networks in Austria in recent years under the noses of the BVT, other Austrian security authorities and not least the government itself.

Since the summer of 2019, 20 illegal weapons caches have been unearthed in Austria, according to the blog “stopptdierichten.at,” which documents such finds. This latest weapons cache is now the third to be uncovered in the course of investigations into a network of far-right extremists in Austria and Germany.

In July, house searches were carried out in the neo-Nazi milieu in Lower Austria, Upper Austria, Vienna and Burgenland. Large numbers of fully and semi-automatic firearms plus ammunition were found, in addition to Nazi memorabilia. Among the weapons were rifles issued by the Austrian armed forces, indicating that the network maintains contacts with the military.

As was subsequently announced, a so-called “Militia of the Upright” wanted to “overturn the system” through right-wing terror. Once again, only two weapons bans were issued in Vienna and Burgenland.

In December, during an investigation in Lower Austria, the authorities discovered a huge arms depot run by the well-known neo-Nazi Peter Binder. In this case, 76 submachine guns and assault rifles, 14 handguns as well as about 100,000 rounds of ammunition, hand grenades, explosives and an extensive collection of Wehrmacht (Germany’s army during WWII) equipment were seized.

According to Interior Minister Nehammer, the weapons were intended for Nazi circles in Germany in order to build up “a far right militia.” In the course of the investigation, two kilos of TNT, four mines, two hand grenades, ammunition and several other weapons were found during further house searches. It was notable that the finds were uncovered in the course of investigating organised drug trafficking, although the mastermind was a known neo-Nazi with multiple convictions, who had already been involved in similar practices in the past.

Peter Binder is a well-known figure in the Austrian neo-Nazi scene and has close connections to Germany. He was arrested in the mid-1990s in the course of a series of far-right attacks in Austria involving letter bombs which killed four people and injured another 15, some seriously.

Although explosives and instructions for building bombs were found on Binder’s person at the time, he was acquitted of complicity and sentenced to just five years in prison for crimes aimed at reviving National Socialism. The neo-Nazi Franz Fuchs was later found guilty of acting as a sole perpetrator, although massive doubts were raised at the time about his ability to work alone.

In the following years, Binder received further sentences, including in 2010 for drug trafficking. Most recently, in

January 2018, he was sentenced in Passau to ten months' imprisonment on probation for importing weapons and narcotics. During a check at the Passau border crossing, 250 shotgun shells and 2 grams of amphetamines were found on his person.

In the same year, Binder was sentenced by the regional court of Wiener Neustadt for wearing a belt buckle with Nazi symbols and sending far-right messages. As a result, he received a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence but was able to serve it on day release. During this period, he assembled the weapons cache that has now been found.

Binder had been an activist in the Volkstreue Ausserparlamentarische Opposition (VAPO) funded by the leading Austrian neo-Nazi Gottfried Küssel. VAPO referred to Hitler as one of history's "greatest men" and organised rallies and military exercises involving well-known politicians from the Freedom Party (FPÖ), such as Andreas Reichhard and later Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache. The VAPO had links to terrorist circles and was dismantled in the 1990s.

There are clear indications that the weapons found were intended for far-right militias in Germany. Evidence indicates that Binder had been in close contact with neo-Nazis in Berlin for years, who also supported him in the procurement of explosives. According to the platform "stopptdierechten.at," his name was also mentioned in investigations into the far-right German terrorist cell, the National Socialist Underground, NSU. Apparently, right-wing extremists close to the NSU had already been in contact with Binder before the NSU committed its years-long series of racist murders. Weapons depots in Austria were also mentioned in investigations into other right-wing networks in Germany.

Already a year ago, the question arose how a known neo-Nazi with a criminal record, who had already been released from prison and was at the centre of investigations into a terrorist series, could have managed to stockpile weapons and explosives on a large scale to build a far-right terrorist network.

Binder and his followers were clearly operating on the radar of the security authorities. The BVT has known for years how the far-right milieu finances itself. It is no coincidence that the case recalls the so-called Object 21, a "cultural association" founded by neo-Nazis in 2010 which financed its activities through drug and arms trafficking as well as extortion.

Object 21 also had contacts in Germany. Its cadres had connections to the Thüringer Heimatschutz (THS), to which the NSU terrorists Böhnhardt, Mundlos and Zschäpe all belonged. The THS, in turn, was financed by Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, via its undercover agent Tino Brandt.

Willi Mernyi, chairman of the Mauthausen Committee Austria, summarised the findings as follows: "Organised crime finances Brown violence: we already know this connection from 'Object 21' in Upper Austria. On that occasion, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution also failed in its

duties. In both cases, the neo Nazi groups came unstuck, not for their plans to overthrow the government, but over their drug trafficking. In the process, the two weapons caches could have led to the deaths of hundreds of people."

The new finding makes clear that the BVT has not "failed." Not only has it not made any effort to seriously dismantle the right-wing extremist networks, it even encourages them. In Germany, too, radical right-wing networks like Nordkreuz and Hannibal have links deep into the state and security apparatuses.

In Austria, the BVT is also known for links to the extreme right-wing spectrum. During the FPÖ's participation in government from 2000 to 2007 and from 2017 to 2019, the BVT was reshuffled with recruits from persons politically close to the FPÖ. At the same time, surveillance of the far right was deliberately scaled back. In particular, the FPÖ Interior Minister Herbert Kickl aggressively sought to cover up the close ties between his party and neo-Nazi circles and intervened accordingly using the services of the BVT.

At the end of 2018, two high-ranking BVT employees were investigated for sharing photos with anti-Semitic and racist slogans in a Whatsapp group. In 2015, the former head of the BVT, Peter Gridling, appeared at a meeting of the notorious Vienna Akademikerbund, a platform for anti-Semites, Holocaust deniers and other far-right extremists.

The FPÖ's links to openly fascist groups are well documented. The most recent example is the latest issue of Infodirekt, a far right, anti-Semitic "Magazine for Patriots." The Salzburg FPÖ not only placed advertisements in the magazine, there is also an article profiling the FPÖ's provincial leader.

Up until 2002, the government published an annual report on far-right extremism, until the ÖVP and FPÖ discontinued it.

Even after the FPÖ left the government at the end of last year, its far-right policies continued to be enacted. All of Austria's established parties have essentially adopted the policies of the far right. In the ruling coalition, the Greens have replaced the FPÖ and are continuing its course. The Social Democrats (SPÖ) have long been involved in pacts with the far right at a local level.

In this climate, the number of far-right crimes have risen dramatically in recent years. In 2019, 797 "offences with a far-right background" were registered, 65 more than in 2018. From January to June this year, 443 far right, racist, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic offences were registered, i.e., 100 more than in the same period of the previous year, according to figures from the Austrian Interior Ministry.



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