

German neo-Nazis remain at large after assassination attempt on journalists

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In April 2018, two photojournalists were brutally attacked by neo-Nazis Gianluca B. and Nordulf H. in Fretterode, Thuringia. They suffered massive injuries, and it was only by luck that the attack did not end fatally. Although this was one of the most serious attacks on journalists in Germany in recent years, the perpetrators remain at large after the verdict was announced on September 15.

The journalists attacked, who conduct investigative work into the right-wing scene, were observing a meeting of right-wing extremists at the home of German National Party (NPD) member Thorsten Heise. When they were discovered, Gianluca B. and Nordulf H. chased the journalists in close pursuit through the streets of the region until they ended up in a ditch. Later, Gianluca B. smashed the skull of one of the two journalists using a tractor wrench. Nordulf H., Heise's son, stabbed the other journalist in the leg with a knife.

The assassination attempt on the journalists, as well as the absurdly lenient sentence handed down by the Mühlhausen Regional Court, are a serious blow to press freedom. According to Reporters Without Borders, this has been on the decline in Germany for years, and attacks from the right-wing milieu are on the rise.

At the same time, the Fretterode trial further worsens the climate created by all the establishment parties at federal and state level in recent years, in which right-wing extremists can take action against anyone who gets in their way—without having to fear serious consequences.

The verdict in the trial against the neo-Nazis reveals the extent of the rightward shift by the German judicial system. More than four years after the attack and after more than 30 days at trial, the perpetrators got off virtually scot-free. The criminal court only considered the charges of dangerous bodily harm and the damage to the journalists' car to be proven. Nordulf H. was sentenced to

200 hours of community service under the juvenile criminal code; Gianluca B. received a 12-month suspended sentence. The theft of the journalists' €1,500 camera equipment remains unsolved. The verdict is not yet legally binding, and both the public prosecutor's office and the co-plaintiffs have announced an appeal.

The trial before the Mühlhausen court resembled a Kafkaesque performance in which the victims were turned into perpetrators. Presiding Judge Andrea Kortus believed Gianluca B. and Nordulf H. to have mistaken their victims not for journalists but for Antifa activists. In an interview with broadcaster NDR, Axel Kulbarsch, spokesman for the Mühlhausen Regional Court, defended the perpetrators in line with this statement: "Simply taking pictures and operating a camera" was not enough to know "that the person operating the camera is a journalist."

In other words, in the court's opinion, it is apparently legitimate to act against left-wing activists and to attack them in the most brutal way.

Judge Kortus did not say a word about the extreme right-wing views of the two defendants, speaking of "so-called neo-Nazis" and "two ideological camps" that were "far apart." She also used this to justify the lenient sentence, since the attack by Gianluca B. and Nordulf H. had not been directed against journalists.

Kortus made no secret of her own convictions and articulated herself in the jargon of the neo-Nazi scene, as Kulbarsch confirmed: the defendants had been "fed up with being photographed or recorded, and therefore first of all—and this is how the chairwoman [judge] put it—wanted to send the insects away from their village."

The neo-Nazis played down their attack as self-defence, with which they had wanted to peacefully assert the right to control their own image. The court also did not consider Nordulf H.'s statement that the reporters had tried to run him over twice to be refutable—and that this had possibly even led to the outbreak of violence in the

first place. The actions of the neo-Nazis were “basically comprehensible and admitted,” according to the court.

There had also been “procedural delays contrary to the rule of law” that had led to mitigating circumstances for the defendants. Kulbarsch confirmed this to NDR: “The fact that the defendants were in the public eye and extensive reporting took place over a long period of time was taken into account by the Third Criminal Chamber as a mitigating circumstance when it came to the sentence.” The delay in the proceedings lies with the court, as the former presiding judge retired, and the replacement took a long time—for which the two accused neo-Nazis have now been rewarded.

The reasoning used by the court to justify the low sentence against the right-wing extremists is a slap in the face of the victims and a clear signal to the right-wing scene throughout the country: “We’ve got your back.”

The police’s negligent investigation extensively aided and abetted the scandalous verdict. Evidence was able to be brushed aside unchallenged, a knife in the perpetrators’ vehicle attracted no attention, and the journalists’ presumably stolen photographic equipment was searched for only once by a patrol in the semi-darkness.

Sven Adam, who defended one of the two journalists in court, called the police investigation a “systemic and structural failure.” The “charges could be tried here not because of, but in spite of, the investigative work of the local police.”

In contrast, the Thuringia state authorities reacted uncompromisingly to a complaint against the two journalists filed by Thorsten Heise. While the house of Gianluca B. was never searched and that of the Heise’s only half-heartedly, the public prosecutor’s office in Mühlhausen described the house search of one of the journalists two days before the verdict was announced as “proportionate.” A spokesman explained that the special protection of journalists ends when they are defendants and added, “We investigate without regard to the person.”

After the scandalous verdict, representatives of the Left Party-Social Democrat (SPD)-Green state government declared their dismay. Madeleine Henfling, a Green Party member of the state legislature, spoke of a “scandal” and a repeated failure of justice, trivializing right-wing violence. Dorothea Marx of the SPD told broadcaster MDR, “That the court considers the lives and health of supposed political opponents less worthy of protection than those of journalists and derives a penalty discount from that is humanly and legally wrong.”

This hypocrisy is surpassed only by the Left Party. Speaking to NRD, Katharina König-Preuss, a member of the state parliament, said, “Something is broken here on so many levels, something is crooked here, and this in a federal state that repeatedly declares, also through corresponding political representatives, that everything is being done here to take action against the right. I don’t notice that happening.”

The fact that König-Preuss “doesn’t notice anything” about the alleged “action against the right” is simply because this is not taking place. On the contrary, in Thuringia, in particular, the Left Party-SPD-Green state government, led by the Left Party, cooperates with the right-wing extremists in the state parliamentary committees and provides them with central positions. In early 2020, State Premier Ramelow even used his own vote to help far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) deputy Michael Kaufmann become vice president of the Thuringia state legislature.

The main responsibility for the political and ideological climate in which neo-Nazis can declare journalists fair game without challenge lies with the ruling class. In recent years, all the establishment parties—above all the SPD, the Left Party, and the Greens—have moved further and further to the right and have largely adopted the AfD’s program—refugee baiting, the rearmament of Germany, and allowing the pandemic to run wild.

Against this backdrop, right-wing extremists feel emboldened to take increasingly brutal action against anyone who gets in their way, and do not even shy away from attempted assassinations as in Fretterode. Right-wing violence can only be stopped by the independent intervention of the working class, which must vehemently reject right-wing extremism, militarism and war and oppose these evils with a socialist program.



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