

EUROPE

On Edge from Attacks, Germany Finds Far-Right Radicals Within Security Services

Amid increase in far-right violence, investigations find police and military personnel involvement in suspected extremist activities, including weapons possession and plotting attacks

By Bojan Pancevski

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BERLIN—Germany’s security agencies are investigating their own ranks for suspected plots to attack immigrants and politicians, as authorities have become increasingly concerned about allegations of extreme-right radicalism among some soldiers and police officers.

The probes examine a range of activities, from racist discussions in online chat forums and illegal weapons possession, to suspected hit lists of left-wing politicians and liberal activists, according to confidential documents and people familiar with the investigations. The inquiries are also examining alleged plots to carry out terrorist attacks.

The investigations come amid broader concerns over far-right extremism in Germany. On Wednesday, a suspected right-wing extremist attacked a synagogue full of worshipers in the eastern town of Halle on Yom Kippur, the holiest Jewish holiday, killing two people.



A banner with an eagle, reading 'Bombs for the System,' is carried at a far-right rally in the central German city of Kassel on July 20. PHOTO: JONAS NOLDEN/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

They constitute a small minority among Germany's security personnel, but the presence of anti-immigrant sentiment and rogue networks within the security agencies is an acutely sensitive matter because of the country's Nazi past.

Officials fear that far-right extremism is seeping into the ranks of police and soldiers, as a number of their officers have been indicted or sentenced, and dozens of others are being investigated, for offenses ranging from links to extremist groups to plotting terrorist attacks in the period since the migration crisis of 2015.

Details of the German investigations were cited in a confidential report earlier this month by Europol, the European Union law-enforcement agency, which found that European far-right militants are actively working to recruit soldiers and police officers in order to acquire combat and weapons skills, according to two officials familiar with the document.



Immigration lawyer Seda Basay-Yildiz, left in 2018, received death threats for her work representing migrants. Police in December arrested five police officers in the case. **PHOTO:** CHRISTOF STACHE/PRESS POOL

Some of the security agencies' investigations were launched in recent months, others years ago, but they all gained urgency after a recent increase in politically motivated violence by far-right extremists. A suspected neo-Nazi terror cell went on trial for terrorism on Sept. 30 for allegedly planning mass murder in Berlin. A pro-immigration politician was killed in June and an Eritrean immigrant was gunned down on the street by a self-declared xenophobe.

According to Germany's domestic intelligence agency, far-right extremists have committed 10,105 violent crimes in the past decade, as well as 83 murders since 1990. In comparison, Islamist terrorists killed 17 people in the same period.

The danger of Islamic terror was now matched by the threat of right-wing extremism, Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said.

“The threat from anti-Semitism, right-wing extremism and right-wing terrorism is very high,” Mr. Seehofer said in a press conference on Thursday.

In September 2017, police raided the headquarters of an elite unit of Germany’s special forces.

They found that a special-forces sergeant, who is an expert in sabotage, managed multiple chat channels on the encrypted service Telegram with a total of up to 500 participants, including a SWAT police officer, other senior police staff and senior army officials, as well as civilians such as lawyers and doctors.

In one of the chat channels, the special-forces sergeant, who served in Afghanistan, discussed in 2016 possible violent clashes prompted by Muslim immigration, according to investigation files.

“Unless the conflict happens this year or the next, then in 10 years’ time we won’t be able to defend ourselves anymore,” he wrote. When interrogated by police about his message, he said that mass migration would make Islam a state religion in European countries.

Some in the group had discussed rounding up political opponents and shooting them at an abandoned quarry, according to investigation documents. It hasn’t yet been determined whether any participants took steps to enact the plan.

One chat-group member celebrated his birthday by organizing a shooting tournament with a trophy bearing the name of a Muslim victim who was murdered by the National Socialist Underground, a neo-Nazi group. He and former officers of the elite police squad, investigators say, kept a list of pro-immigration personalities they said should be shot in a secluded quarry. They are under investigation for terrorism.

The special-forces sergeant, who declined to be named, was convicted in September for illegal weapons possession.

In December, five police officers were arrested in Frankfurt for sending death threats to an immigration lawyer. According to investigators, one of the threats, sent in a fax, read, “Disgusting Turkish pig, you won’t destroy Germany,” and threatened to “butcher” the lawyer’s daughter.

The officers have been suspended for the duration of the investigation, which is ongoing.

Two Bavarian police officers were fired in April for being members of a far-right association known as Reichsbürger, or citizens of the Reich, whose members have a history of violent encounters with police.

In September, a member of the police’s elite SWAT team who specialized as a sniper was charged for illegally owning a machine gun, two pistols and a stash of 30,000 bullets. Associates of the SWAT member also purchased body-bags to be used on what they called “Day X.” Some of the



People hold a vigil for Walter Luebcke, a pro-immigration politician who was killed by a known far-right extremist in June.
PHOTO: SWEN PFÖRTNER/DPA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

men told investigators that this was code for a breakdown of the constitutional order due to immigration-related riots, according to investigation files.

In a separate probe, a police inspector and a soldier are being investigated for conspiring to commit a terrorist attack.

Authorities' investigations into their own ranks have uncovered people who also question the legitimacy of the government and profess admiration for the autocratic rule of President Vladimir Putin's Russia, according to classified documents concerning two larger investigations seen by The Wall Street Journal, as well as interviews with investigators, suspects and their associates.

Indeed, a group of active servicemen met with Russian elite soldiers and operatives of the FSB, Russia's main intelligence service, in Stuttgart and in Russia, according to one participant, in 2017 and 2018.

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A spokesman for the military declined to comment on any internal investigation. A spokesman for the domestic intelligence agency said it was looking into Russian links uncovered by the criminal probe. The Federal Criminal Office, Germany's FBI, declined to comment on its investigations.

A senior member of Uniter, a support group for veterans, dismissed all allegations of extremism or any illegal activity. He said that army and law-enforcement officials were increasingly frustrated with the way the country was being run.

“Tensions are rising just as we are facing an economic downturn. Social peace is now bought with money, but there is turbulence ahead,” the person said. “We are sitting on a powder keg.”



A sign outside a building reads: 'Humboldt Street against anti-Semitism + hate' in Halle, Germany, on Thursday. A day before, a suspected right-wing extremist attacked a synagogue full of worshipers in the town. PHOTO: FABRIZIO BENSCH/REUTERS

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