

FAR-RIGHT VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM RISES IN GERMANY: NATIONAL SOCIALIST UNDERGROUND (NSU) TERRORIST GROUP AND THE MURDERS OF EIGHT TURKISH-GERMAN CITIZENS

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Introduction

After the German reunification, a major surge in far-right violence across Germany and especially in East Germany began to surface. These incidents initiated a wide debate about the nature of threats from the far-right. During this period, physical assaults and arson attacks occurred in Rostock-Lichtenhagen, Hoyerswerda, Frankfurt and der Oder, and Magdeburg in the east of the country and in Mölln and in Solingen in the west.[1] Rostock attacks are considered the most disturbing resurgence of right-wing, xenophobic violence since the rise of Nazism.[2] In city of Hoyerswerda in September 1991, a mob of right wing radicals armed with Molotov cocktails, tracer ammunition and stones attacked hostels for contract workers and asylum seekers and terrorized residents for full five days.[3] As one of the most horrific arson attack against the immigrants in Germany, in 1993, four local youths killed five members of the Turkish Genç family in Solingen.[4] This brutal attack is remembered each year as the Solingen Tragedy.[5] In 1992 in Mölln, a young German right-wing extremist had set off a bomb that killed three Turks.[6] This attack was reported by the New York Times as the worst episode of violence against foreigners since Germany was unified three years ago, a woman and two girls, all of Turkish nationality, burned to death today after firebombs were thrown into their home.[7]

How these incidents were interpreted in Germany in 1990s

The violent incidents caused by the far-right against immigrants, refugees, and foreigners in 1990s began to be studied by German academia and some of these studies were supported and sponsored by German official institutions. In these studies, these incidents were mostly attributed to the disintegration and societal change processes after East Germanys (German Democratic Republic - GDR) collapse and the end of the Cold War.

However, there were no indications in these studies to a substantial terrorist threat stemming from a dangerous mixture of an organized radicalization process fostered by individuals technically and mentally capable of terrorism. In addition, there were no references to a supply of weapons and explosives, a critical mass of followers, and an ideology highly in favor of violence and activism.

As underlined in the recent credible study on the history of the far-right terrorism in Germany;

> the academic and public interest in right-wing terrorism in the late 1990s was halted by the September 11 events in 2001, after which the public, academic and official interest in the topic was largely deflected to Islamist terrorism and not picked up again before late 2011. Consequently, German terrorism research can be considered lacking a concise theoretical concept about right-wing terrorism compared to other phenomena, for example, Islamist terrorism.[8]

How did National Socialist Underground (NSU-Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund) surface?

Between 2000-2007, ten people were killed in Germany by unknown perpetrators. It was a strange coincidence eight of the victims belonged to Germanys three million Turkish community. Several robberies and bombings also occurred in this period.

The information contained in the above-mentioned study by Daniel Koehler (the Director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De- Radicalization Studies - GIRDS) on the history, emergence, and activities of the NSU, narrates the coming into surface of the NSU as follows:

> In November 2011, in the small town of Eisenach (Thuringia) a coincidence and failed bank robbery led the German police to a caravan in which they hoped to find the suspected robbers. Shortly before their apprehension, the two suspects committed suicide after a short shoot-out with the police. Quickly afterwards the vehicle burned down. When police and firefighters searched the debris, they found large amounts of money and an extensive armory including two guns belonging to a police officer assassinated in 2007 and her severely wounded colleague. About three hours later, another event in the town of Zwickau (Saxony) □ 180 kilometers away □□□ explosion had occurred in an apartment building and the police searched the site, additional weapons and money were found, including the murder weapon of a so-far unsolved killing spree which had cost nine victims their lives between 2000 and 2006. While searching for the woman officially registered in the apartment, numerous DVD videos from a group calling itself the National Socialist Underground (NSU) were received via mail by political, religious, cultural and press institutions. The video contained graphic images of the killings and additional explosive attacks blended in with a Pink Panther cartoon. Four days after the explosion, the missing woman □ later revealed as Beate Zschäpe □ turned herself in. As the German authorities started to put the pieces together, they recognized

that they had discovered the underground cell of at least three wanted neo-Nazis that had gone clandestine in the late 1990s. In the following investigations, the public shock quickly turned into massive critique against the security agencies most notably the criminal police and intelligence for having failed to detect this terrorist cell for over a decade. In addition, the mishandling of information requests from politicians and journalists for example, the destruction of files after being requested created a further loss of trust in the agencies. During the investigations that followed, more and more details about the blatant lack of cooperation, the involvement of paid informants, racism within the police forces and the far-reaching incompetence regarding analytical resources in the field of right-wing terrorism were uncovered. In addition, a wide national support network of the NSU cell showed that the cell was not operating in complete isolation but in fact remained in active exchange with the wider movement. All in all, the NSU caused the most severe crisis of the German internal security system after the Second World War a process called by the Federal Prosecutor General Harald Range Germanys September 11 in March 2012 (FAZ 2012). By now a total of ten assassinations, three bomb attacks and fourteen bank robberies between 1998 and 2011 were attributed to the NSU and the trial in Munich against the last surviving member Beate Zschäpe and the four most important supporters is already the most extensive terror trail in post-Second World War Germany. The failure of authorities on all levels, including the suspicion of a right-wing background behind the murders, still remains a heatedly debated topic and object of numerous parliamentary inquiry commissions.[9]

As per the detailed account provided in the afore mentioned study on the background of the NSU, Beate Zschäpe, Uwe Mundlos, and Uwe Böhnhardt were the core members of the group. They lived together for more than thirteen years. The trio met at the early 1990s in the East German town of Jena. Regularly visiting the youth club Winzerclub, they met other activists of the far right movement, who became essential for their following terrorist activities. Ralf Wohlleben and André Kapke were among these so-called activists. Dating back to long before the German reunification, Jena in fact had a right-wing extremist tradition of more than a decade and had a well-established reputation within the nationwide movement, as for example the notorious and militant Anti-Antifa strategy was developed by Thuringian activists in the summer of 1994 which led to the establishment of the Heimatschutz (home protection) concept and the founding of the Thüringer Heimatschutz (Thuringia Home Protection, THS) in 1996. Then, three core members of the NSU went clandestine. They regularly participated in far-right rallies, distributed propaganda material and were convicted for different politically motivated crimes. In September 1996, André Kapke, Uwe Mundlos, Uwe Böhnhardt and Ralf Wohlleben visited the trial of a former right-wing terrorist Manfred Roeder (DA) in full skinhead uniform and followed it closely. The group did not stay in the role of silent observers but rolled out a banner in front of the court room saying, Our grandfathers were not criminals.[10]

NSU trial and timid court verdict

After 438 trial days spanning over five years, the 6th Senate of the Munich High District Court the state security senate its verdict in the National Socialist Underground" trial.[11] Since the two of the core members of the NSU, Uwe Bohnhardt and Uwe Mundlos, were found dead following the above-mentioned failed bank robbery and subsequent shoot -out, the only member of the trio that could be tried was Beate Zschäpe.Zschäpe was found guilty of being complicit in 10 murders, 43 attempted murders, 2 severe bombing attacks, 15 bank and other robberies and sentenced to life in prison. The court confirmed her particularly grave guilt. According to Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung analysis of the court ruling, this means that Zschäpe can technically be released after serving 15 years a common practice for life sentences in the German legal system. [12]

The prison sentences for the other two defendants held in investigative custody, Ralf Wohlleben and André Eminger, did not follow the suggestions of the federal prosecutors attorneys. Wohlleben received ten years two less than called for by the prosecution. Eminger received only two years and six months and was found partially not guilty.

There is a widespread general assessment that the verdict failed to reveal, in all its aspects, the background of the NSU murders and its connections within the German state and its intelligence community. Moreover, the real perpetrators have not been revealed. In this respect, it is not possible to consider the verdict as satisfactory, either in the interest of justice, or for easing public conscience. The court was openly timid in its ruling. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung states in its analysis regarding the verdict that;

> [the] gap in the now concluded mammoth trial was and remains the institutional racism of the investigating authorities, who by no means investigated as was almost literally stated in all directions. The said analysis further states that Chancellor Merkels promise of a spotless investigation and prosecution of the NSUs backers at the central memorial celebration held in Berlin on 23 February 2012 was not kept.[13]

Could the timid court decision regarding the NSU case have played a role in the recent rise of far-right terrorism in Germany?

Germany was shocked by the assassination of the Kassel city government president Walter Lübcke on 2 June 2019. According to Der Spiegel report;

> On Saturday, June 15, at 2 a.m., a German SWAT team in Kassel arrested a man they suspected of shooting the district president, Walter Lübcke, in the head. A piece of dandruff found on the plaid shirt Lübcke had been wearing at the time of his death lead investigators to the 45-year-old suspect, who has been identified as Stephan Ernst. There was other evidence as well. Ernst has since confessed to the murder, saying he planned and carried out the attack alone and that he was motivated by comments Lübcke made in October 2015 in support of refugees in Germany.[14]

It is reported that the suspect has a neo-Nazi background and he had once tried to plant a pipe bomb at a hostel for asylum-seekers and had beaten a migrant in prison. It is also reported that information from Ernst has also led investigators to a cache of weapons.

The same exclusive Der Spiegel report mentions in its opening paragraph the following:

> As the interior ministers of Germany's 16 states convened in a hotel in the northern city of Kiel, the first item on the agenda was a security report. Sinan Selen, the vice president of Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), which is responsible for monitoring all forms of extremism, began enumerating the gravest threats to the country.
>
> Then Selen did something unusual, at least for a meeting of German security officials -- he didn't talk about Islamism. Instead, according to people who were at the meeting, he spoke extensively about the danger posed by far-right extremists and so-called Reichsbürger, a fringe group that rejects modern Germany and instead adheres to the old German Reich.
>
> This represented one of the biggest challenges for Germany's security apparatus, Selen said. Less than 48 hours later, it would become abundantly clear just how serious the right-wing extremist threat had become.

At this point, questions come to mind: Could the German court's timid ruling on NSU case have played a role in encouraging the far-right acts of terrorism? How does Germany, rightly proud of its democracy, surrender so easily to the far-right terrorism?

Conclusion

For years people have been talking in academia about the serious increase of xenophobia and xenophobic violence in Germany. In order not to remind the old wounds, people refrain from mentioning the institutionalized racism existing in Germany and try to explain the existing problems by pointing towards xenophobic attitudes, prejudices, and behaviors. In this context, people strive to explain the impact of migrations, immigrants, and refugees on the rise of xenophobia. However, we see that the point reached in Germany unfortunately goes far beyond the scope of the contemporary academic debate. It is quite unfortunate that nowadays we are obliged to talk about far-right domestic terror acts against politicians in Germany who are defending human values. This situation requires more in-depth, concrete discussion. It is time to stop sweeping the serious threats emerging in Western Europe under the rug and face the real problem.

It is a fact that certain sections of the Western European societies are moving steadily to far-right quarters feeding from white supremacist and racist ideas. This is not only a major threat to immigrants, asylum seekers, and foreigners living in the Western European countries, but also to the citizens of certain European countries, including the Turks of Germany. What is happening in Western Europe and especially in Germany nowadays has made concepts such as xenophobia ineffective in grasping the gravity of the situation. It

seems that in the very near future, we will be obliged to consider Second World concepts and revert to old terminology which explain the current developments more adequately.

Photo: Daily Sabah

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[5] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Remembering Solingen: The Fractious Rise of Extreme Xenophobia in Western Europe, *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 19, 2018.

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[9] Koehler, 20–21.

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[11] NSU Trial Verdict Announced: After 438 Trial Days, a Verdict in the NSU Case Has

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