

# German state intelligence agency spies on journalists

By Sven Heymann  
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The intelligence agency of the state of Lower Saxony has for years been illegally spying on journalists involved in researching and publishing information about extreme right-wing circles.

Maren Brandenburger, the new head of the State Intelligence Agency (LfV), announced in mid-September that attention had been drawn to particular journalists during the sampling of at least 9,000 departmental records. Meanwhile, files relating to seven of the journalists have been deleted. The surveillance of the data apparently covered the period from 2006 to 2012.

Those affected include freelance journalist Andrea Röpke and sports journalist Ronny Blaschke. Brandenburger personally telephoned both of these journalists in recent weeks to inform them about the spying.

For more than 20 years, Röpke has been carrying out research on the background to the far right-wing scene and is considered one of Germany's leading experts in the field. She has been the target of neo-Nazi attacks several times. Results of her work have appeared in newspapers and magazines, including *Der Spiegel*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Focus* and *Stern*, as well as on television programmes such as "Fakt" and "Panorama." She has been repeatedly acclaimed for her work.

Röpke had earlier become suspicious that she was under surveillance and last year demanded a response from the LfV in relation to her fears. The office simply lied to her, falsely claiming it had no file on her.

Blaschke writes about violence and right-wing extremism in football. He once explained in a guest commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that he lectures and conducts workshops and panel discussions "in fan projects, schools, universities, local and state administrative bodies...with the support of associations, foundations, trade unions, and does so on the initiative of churches and all the democratic parties".

The LfV head, Brandenburger, told him on the telephone that a lecture to the Left Party in Hanover may have made him a target of the secret service. According to Blaschke, however, she did not provide him with any further details. He said the LfV confirmed to him in writing that his records had been deleted, following the investigation into his case. But he still did not know what they had on him.

Unlike Andrea Röpke, Blaschke said he had never worried that he might have been watched by the secret services. "I didn't think sport would be important enough. I thought my field wouldn't be as interesting for the authorities as far right-wing rallies, concerts or camps."

Röpke, Blaschke and the five other journalists, whose files—according to the intelligence agency—have been deleted, apparently represent only the tip of the iceberg. The *Der Spiegel* news magazine reported on additional cases encountered during the investigation of the office's database.

Among the new cases is that of André Aden, who works primarily as a photographer for—among others—the "Research North" network, a coalition of journalists focusing public attention on the far right-wing extremist milieu.

Its interest in spying on journalists investigating neo-Nazis casts a revealing light on the political orientation of the intelligence agency. It is now known that members of the far-right National Socialist Underground (NSU) committed their murders under the noses of the intelligence services. At least two dozen of the intelligence service's undercover agents operated in the immediate vicinity of the NSU. The Thuringian Homeland Defence group, from which Uwe Böhnhardt, Uwe Mundlos and Beate Zschäpe came, was supported by ample funding supplied to the undercover agents.

The Lower Saxony Intelligence Agency played an

important role in the operation. A certain Holger G. is one of the five accused in the Munich NSU trial, because he is said to have supported the NSU from its inception until its exposure. Holger G. lived in Lower Saxony, where he was monitored by the intelligence agency in 1999 owing to his relations with the trio, who were then in hiding. But the agency allegedly called off the surveillance after three days, which it subsequently admitted was a “serious mistake”.

The banned extreme right-wing organisation “Blood & Honour” was also particularly active in Lower Saxony in 2000, and had numerous connections to the NSU.

Far-reaching questions are raised by the fact that the intelligence agency ended its surveillance of NSU assistant Holger G. after only a few days, but for years spied on journalists illuminating the murky world of extreme right-wingers. Why did it spy on the journalists, what data did it gather, and what did it do with the data? Was it itself actively involved in obstructing the journalists’ investigations?

The deletion of the data has made it practically impossible to answer these questions.

Newly appointed interior minister Boris Pistorius (Social Democratic Party, SPD) has cited statutory provisions in an attempt to justify the destruction of the data. But this is a blatant deception. The law expressly does not provide for the deletion of the data. It explicitly states that deletion is not to be carried out “if there is reason to believe that the legitimate interests of concerned parties would be thereby affected. In such a case, the data is to be blocked. It may again be processed only with the consent of the party concerned”.

Andrea Röpke has therefore filed charges on suspicion of concealment of documents. Her lawyer, Sven Adam, said that she has also lodged a disciplinary complaint against the officer in charge. She has now also submitted a request for disclosure of files to all the other intelligence agencies in Germany.

The Lower Saxony Intelligence Agency has a long history of targeted provocations. In 1978, its undercover agents blew a hole in the outer wall of the Celle high-security prison to simulate a rescue attempt for Red Army Faction (RAF) terrorist Sigurd Debus who was imprisoned there.

The provocation was only exposed by an investigative journalist eight years later. In addition to the intelligence agency, Ernst Albrecht (Christian Democratic Union, CDU)—head of the government of Lower Saxony at the time and father of current federal labour minister Ursula

von der Leyen—had known about it.

The clandestine surveillance of journalists came to light due to the change of government in Lower Saxony. The SPD and the Greens replaced the former coalition of the CDU and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in the spring.

The spying carried out in the years 2006-2012 occurred within the remit of CDU minister Uwe Schünemann. Schünemann is a security policy hardliner who never misses a chance to demand stronger measures against “terror suspects” and an upgrading of the state apparatus.

The SPD and the Greens are primarily concerned with limiting the damage done to the intelligence agency and diverting attention from its involvement with the extreme right-wing milieu. The new head of the department, Maren Brandenburger, is not without a track record. She was previously spokesperson for the Lower Saxony Intelligence Agency and therefore responsible for defending its public image.

The SPD and the Greens are full of praise for the new LfV boss, who is a member of the SPD, according the Berlin *Tageszeitung* daily. The paper reported that she not only personally informed the journalists affected, but also immediately deleted the illegally collected data. By immediately destroying the data, she has in fact put a stop to further attempts to clear up the matter.

During their state election campaign, the Greens demanded “the complete dismantling of this department”. After their electoral success, the new SPD-Green Party government agreed in their coalition contract to a reform of the intelligence service, and made the agency’s former official spokesperson its head in order to ensure continuity.

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