

Further arrests of German army personnel in neo-Nazi terror plot

By Christoph Vandreier
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German officials ordered the arrest Tuesday of a third army (Bundeswehr) officer suspected of planning a terror attack against political figures. It has therefore become clear that within the army's officer corps, a neo-Nazi network exists that is far larger than previously known.

The man arrested was First Lieutenant Maximilian T., according to the federal state prosecutor. He was accused, together with the two men arrested almost two weeks ago, Franco A. and Matthias F., of preparing "an attack on the life of high-ranking politicians and public officials."

Investigations were launched into Franco A. after he sought in February to collect a loaded pistol he had previously concealed at Vienna airport. It later emerged that the first lieutenant had created a fictitious identity as a Syrian refugee and registered as an asylum seeker. The federal state prosecutor suspects that this was done for the purpose of blaming a terrorist attack on refugees.

According to the investigations, the trio went to great lengths to protect A.'s fictitious identity. He went to the local authorities to claim the welfare payments he was entitled to as a registered refugee. "The absences resulting from this were concealed at least in part by Maximilian T., who gave an alibi for Franco A. to his superiors," the state prosecutor said. The 27-year-old T. was, like A., deployed with infantry battalion 291 in Illkirch, France.

The plotters' plans to procure weapons were far advanced. Along with the pistol at Vienna airport, the right-wing extremist officers had obtained 1,000 cartridges, which they presumably set aside during shooting practice. These included munitions for the G36 and G3 machine guns, as well as the p8 pistol. According to information from Der Spiegel,

investigators found notes in Franco A.'s possession on different types of weapons and their cost on the black market.

Finally, the terrorist cell had identified targets and begun to spy on them. A list of potential victims was reported in the media over the past week, which included former German President Joachim Gauck, Thuringia's Minister President Bodo Ramelow and federal Justice Minister Heiko Maas. Left-wing activists and Jewish and Islamic institutions were also targets of the right-wing extremists.

The state prosecutor has now confirmed the existence of this list, which included 25 targets. Each name was placed in category A, B, C or D, which indicated their priority. Gauck and Maas were in category A.

Der Spiegel also reported that substantial research had been carried out on targeted individuals and groups. The neo-Nazis noted the date of birth and the addresses of various politicians. Considerable amounts of information had been gathered on the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, which campaigns against right-wing extremism. Investigators found a sketch of its Berlin office.

The effort undertaken to maintain the fictitious identity, the purchasing of illegal weapons and finally the detailed spying on terrorist targets show that a terrorist cell with far-reaching plans was at work.

The size of the terrorist cell operating around Franco A. cannot yet be estimated. *Der Spiegel* reported over the weekend that along with the three now arrested, another soldier of battalion 291 and a reservist living in Austria had formed a WhatsApp group in which 36,000 messages were exchanged. Contents of the messages included racist statements and support for violent actions. An investigator also confirmed to the news magazine that the suspects declared their readiness to

kill for their cause.

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There are indications that the neo-Nazis had connections with other barracks. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported testimony from a soldier in Augustdorf. He heard an officer say that he knew of a group of soldiers who were setting aside weapons in order to be able to fight on the right side if civil war broke out. Investigations are still under way to determine whether the officer was referring to Franco A.

While it remains unclear how large the terrorist cell was, evidence suggests that it was embedded within a larger neo-Nazi network in the army that includes higher-ranking figures. Although the neo-Nazi views of the two first lieutenants now arrested were known, their superiors concealed them or hushed them up at one or another time.

After A. produced a graduation paper in December 2013, which a reviewer described as a “radical nationalist, racist appeal,” the soldier received the support of his immediate superior. The body responsible for army discipline, a kind of state prosecutor within the army, which is supposed to examine such serious matters, covered up the affair. In its report, it dismissed “doubts about the required attitude for the system of values.”

When A. was arrested in February this year, he contacted the same army discipline official to ask for help. The lawyer admitted to having “irretrievably deleted” the relevant email exchange. When A. was then arrested in Germany two weeks ago, the deputy commander of the Illkirch location sought pretexts to speak to him in custody. Investigators told *Der Spiegel* that these are only a sample of the connections that they are now looking into.

The neo-Nazi views of Maximilian T. were also no secret. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported that the military surveillance service (MAD) investigated the soldier in 2015 because he allegedly incited a comrade to carry out activities against refugees. The MAD allegedly found no evidence of right-wing extremism and halted the investigation.

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