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political murder in over fifty years**



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Transnational History of the Far Right Series

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Transnational History of the Far Right Series
A Collective Research Project led by Marlene Laruelle

At a time when global political dynamics seem to be moving in favor of illiberal regimes around the world, this research project seeks to fill in some of the blank pages in the contemporary history of the far right, with a particular focus on the transnational dimensions of far-right movements in the broader Europe/Eurasia region.

The recent assassination of the Christian democrat Walter Lübcke, president of the Kassel governmental district, by right-wing extremists, marks the first murder of a politician in Germany in over half a century. It comes at a time in which there is a significant surge of white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups in Germany and other European countries, along with an apparent rearmament of the far-right scene.

In 2018, German investigators found over 1,000 weapons in raids on far-right groups—61% more than in the year before—and registered an increase of right-wing offenses by over 11% in 2019.¹ That right-wing extremist crimes have been significantly on the rise throughout Europe is described in a recent Europol report, pointing out that neo-Nazi groups are intensifying their transnational networking efforts, among them violent neo-Nazi groups, such as the Hammerskins, Soldiers of Odin, Blood & Honour, and Combat 18 (C18).²

The murder of Walter Lübcke is, in many ways, indicative of this worrying trend. Among the groups that have been connected with the murder is the violent hooligan group C18, mentioned in the Europol report, as well as its offshoot, the terror cell, National Socialist Underground (*Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund*), which has been accused of a series of murders in the early 2000s, during which ten people were killed. Furthermore, during raids in the aftermath of Lübcke's murder, investigators found enough weapons to arm a small militia in the immediate environment of the suspects.

Lübcke rose to prominence as a target after giving outspoken support to Angela Merkel's early pro-refugee policy. The targeting of Lübcke intensified in October 2015, when a video of him appeared online, which incurred a wave of hate from the far right. In the video, Lübcke is thanking local initiatives for their commitment in setting up a reception center for refugees, and stating that those who fundamentally disagree with the values that such a commitment upholds "would always be free to leave the country."³ This speech resulted in him receiving several death threats and hundreds of hateful messages.⁴

¹ Nik Martin, "Germany sees surge in weapon seizures from far-right," *Deutsche Welle*, September 28, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-sees-surge-in-weapon-seizures-from-far-right/a-50618760>.

² Martin Kaul and Georg Mascolo, "Europol warnt vor rechten Gewalttaten," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/europol-sicherheit-rechtsextremismus-1.4613424>.

³ Professor Moriatti, "Erstaufnahme Asyl RP Lübke Kassel Lohfelden 14.10.2015," YouTube video, October 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdnLSC2hy9E>.

⁴ "Mordfall Lübcke: Mutmaßlicher Täter plante Tötung offenbar bereits jahrelang," *ARD*, July 8, 2019, <https://classic.ardmediathek.de/tv/tagesschau24/Mordfall-L%C3%BCbcke-Mutma%C3%9Flicher-T%C3%A4ter-plan/tagesschau24/Video?bcastId=6753968&documentId=64617812>.

While further details are surfacing, the assertion by authorities that the assassination had no terroristic background appears rather strange.⁵ In the meantime, it has transpired that state law enforcement and intelligence agencies had files on two of the three persons currently in pretrial detention. The authorities, then, must have had expert knowledge of the suspects' closeness to a range of neo-Nazi organizations and had been keeping a close eye on the activities of at least one of them.

Given that, by now, a total of 46 firearms and a number of other weapons, including explosives, have been discovered in 30 raids by security authorities⁶—numbers that probably would never have transpired if it were not for an official inquiry by the Left Party (Die Linke)—the question arises why authorities would deny that there could be a right-wing terrorist background to the murder, choosing instead to call it a “political assassination”.⁷

The domestic intelligence service of Hesse, the federal state in which Lübcke was murdered, has not only failed to evaluate the danger of the very networks it was watching, but it has also been revealed that one of the three detainees was possibly granted a firearms license as a consequence of the surveillance agency having withheld information pertaining to his right-wing extremist background.

This article describes the progression of events that led to Walter Lübcke's murder, the main suspects involved, and the neo-Nazi milieu in which they were socializing; but, also, the apparent incompetence of the German authorities overseeing the case, which at best constitutes efforts to obfuscate their failures as an agency, and, at worst, indicates that elements of Germany's domestic intelligence services are turning a blind eye on right-wing extremism.

The murder suspect Stephan Ernst

On June 2, 2019, the head of the Kassel regional government, the Christian Democratic politician, Walter Lübcke, was shot at close range in front of his house in northern Hesse, and died shortly afterward in a local hospital. Approximately two weeks after the murder, German investigators identified and arrested the previously convicted right-wing extremist Stephan Ernst by performing DNA evaluations on evidence found at the crime scene. After ten days in pretrial detention, Ernst admitted his guilt in a comprehensive confession that he later revoked. Ernst stated that he had already been close to murdering Lübcke in 2017 and 2018, waylaying the politician in front of his house, but each time had gotten cold feet.⁸

Ernst reportedly attended Lübcke's aforementioned pro-refugee speech, and, in his confession, indicated that Lübcke's statement back then was one of the main motives for his actions, since it had

⁵ In Germany, a terrorist organization is legally defined as an organized association of more than two persons who are cooperating in order to commit terrorist offenses, whereby the term “organized association” refers to an association which is not merely “formed for the direct commission of a criminal offense.” Another legal prerequisite is that individual members subordinate themselves to the will of the collective and that they consider themselves to be a unified association. See: Thomas Fischer, “§ 129a, Bildung terroristischer Vereinigungen, Rn. 4,” in *Strafgesetzbuch und Nebengesetze* (München: C. H. Beck, 2012), 928.

⁶ “Mordfall Lübcke: Beschuldigte verfügten über 46 Schusswaffen,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/mordfall-luebcke-beschuldigte-verfuegten-ueber-46-schusswaffen/24923452.html>.

⁷ “Kein Hinweis auf Terrorgruppe,” Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, Deutscher Bundestag, August 28, 2019, <https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/655686-655686>.

⁸ ARD, “Mordfall Lübcke.”

been on his mind “all the time.”⁹ He saw the statement as evidence that the German people were to be replaced by foreigners,¹⁰ in line with the widespread far-right conspiracy theory of a “Great Replacement,” which holds that, due to Europe’s declining birthrates, immigrants would be purposefully imported and ultimately supersede the “native” white population.

In his confession, Ernst also revealed the hiding place of his weapons: an underground cache on his employer’s premises, where the police found the murder weapon, a 38-caliber revolver of the Brazilian brand Rossi,¹¹ a pump gun, and an Uzi submachine gun with ammunition.¹²

Ernst’s attorney, Dirk Waldschmidt, a popular criminal defense lawyer among right-wing extremists, confirmed the authenticity of the confession at the time. Waldschmidt, a man with his own neo-Nazi past, was vice president of the far-right National Democratic Party (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD) in Hesse, and provided witness support in the prominent trial of the neo-Nazi terror cell, National Socialist Underground, accused of a murder spree in the early 2000s.¹³

By now it has been established that Ernst (born in 1973), owing to his repeated acts of violence against immigrants and leftists, had been under the radar of domestic law enforcement and intelligence agencies since he was a teenager, and was very active in the Kassel neo-Nazi scene.¹⁴ Ernst had a total of 37 entries in the criminal register, as reported by the Hessian Interior Minister, Peter Beuth, in the course of the Committee on Internal Affairs’ investigation of the Lübcke murder.¹⁵

Even before Ernst had reached majority age, he had set fire to a residential building mainly inhabited by immigrants,¹⁶ followed by an attempted manslaughter,¹⁷ and an attempted bomb attack on an asylum camp. After serving a 6-year prison sentence, he continued with his extremely violent behavior.¹⁸ In 2003 Ernst was accused of having committed collective manslaughter in Kassel, but

⁹ “Rechtsextremist gesteht Mord: Stephan E. erschoss Lübcke aus Hass auf dessen Flüchtlingspolitik,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/rechtsextremist-gesteht-mord-stephan-e-erschoss-luebcke-aus-hass-auf-dessen-fluechtlingspolitik/24496132.html>.

¹⁰ Der Tagesspiegel, “Rechtsextremist gesteht Mord.”

¹¹ Fidelius Schmid, Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt and Steffen Winter, “Ballistische Expertise Schussgutachter belasten mutmaßlichen Lübcke-Mörder schwer,” *Spiegel Online*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/mordfall-walter-luebcke-schussgutachter-belasten-mutmasslichen-taeter-schwer-a-1277624.html>.

¹² Lena Kampf, “Mord an Walter Lübcke: Zweiter Verdächtiger belastet,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/luebcke-mord-markus-h-1.4603328!amp>.

¹³ Der Tagesspiegel, “Rechtsextremist gesteht Mord.”

¹⁴ Frank Jansen, “Mordfall Walter Lübcke: Das Strafregister des Stephan E.,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/mordfall-walter-luebcke-das-strafregister-des-stephan-e-/24468696.html>.

¹⁵ Jansen, “Mordfall Walter Lübcke.”

¹⁶ “Mord an Regierungspräsident: Was im Fall Lübcke bislang bekannt ist,” Tagesschau, *ARD*, July 2, 2019, https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/luebcke-131~_origin-9305eab7-70e1-46d8-8474-d993353e712e.html; Thorsten Fuchs and Jan Sternberg, “Mordfall Lübcke: Die bürgerliche Fassade des Stephan E.,” *Hannoversche Allgemeine*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.haz.de/Nachrichten/Politik/Deutschland-Welt/Die-buergerliche-Fassade-des-Stephan-E>.

¹⁷ Martin Klingst, Anton Maegerle, Daniel Müller, Yassin Musharbash and Holger Stark, “Verdächtiger im Fall Lübcke hat Asylbewerberheim angegriffen,” *Zeit Online*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-06/walter-luebcke-kassel-mordfall-ermittlungen>.

¹⁸ Jansen, “Mordfall Walter Lübcke;” Tagesschau, “Mord an Regierungspräsident;” Klingst et al., “Verdächtiger im Fall Lübcke.”

apparently the evidence was not solid enough for a conviction.¹⁹ His last criminal record before the murder charges dates back to about ten years ago, when, on May 1, 2009, Ernst and about 400 other neo-Nazis attacked a rally led by the German Trade Union Federation (*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, DGB) in Dortmund with stones and batons, for which he received a seven-month suspended prison sentence.²⁰

The latest findings of security authorities suggest, however, that Ernst had been involved in other incidences of extreme violence. In September 2019, the German federal prosecutor's office announced that Ernst was suspected of yet another attempted murder in 2016: a case that remains unsolved. That year, authorities assume, Ernst had likely attempted "to kill an Iraqi asylum-seeker in a sneak attack for base motives."²¹ Ernst is said to have "approached the victim unnoticed from behind, and then suddenly stabbed him in the upper back with a knife."²²

It is not quite clear when law enforcement and intelligence agencies stopped watching Ernst, if they ever did. But it is known that his name appeared in a 2013 secret intelligence report by the Hessian Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution about the violent Hessian neo-Nazi scene. Ernst's name appears 11 times in the report, but includes only activities up until 2004.²³ Research shows though that, at least until 2011, Ernst was involved with several neo-Nazi organizations,²⁴ and, right up until his detention, continued to be associated with prominent right-wing extremists.²⁵

Ernst's involvement with neo-Nazi organizations can be traced back to his time spent after his 6-year prison sentence for an attempted manslaughter and an attempted bomb attack in his early twenties, for which crimes he was released in 1999. At that time, Ernst immediately started mingling with the Kassel right-wing extremist scene, with which he was allegedly put in contact by his father-in-law.²⁶ Between 2000 and 2004, Ernst was a member of the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany

¹⁹ Fuchs and Sternberg, "Mordfall Lübcke."

²⁰ Ben Knight, "Suspect in German politician's murder confesses," *Deutsche Welle*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/suspect-in-german-politicians-murder-confesses/a-49357904>.

²¹ "Neo-Nazi suspect in German official's murder linked to stabbing of Iraqi man," *The Local*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.thelocal.de/20190919/neo-nazi-suspect-in-german-officials-murder-linked-to-stabbing-of-iraqi-man>.

²² The Local, "Neo-Nazi suspect."

²³ "Äußerungen über Geheimakte Frömmrich bittet um Entschuldigung - den Linken reicht das nicht," *Hessenschau*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.hessenschau.de/politik/froemmrigh-bittet-um-entschuldigung---den-linken-reicht-das-nicht,froemmrigh-entschuldigung-100.html>.

²⁴ Robert Bongen, Julian Feldmann, Anne Ruprecht and Nino Seidel, "Mutmaßlicher Lübcke-Mörder: Wer ist Stephan E.?" *Panorama*, *NDR*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/panorama3/Mutmasslicher-Luebcke-Moerder-Wer-ist-Stephan-E,luebcke134.html>.

²⁵ Maik Baumgärtner, Matthias Bartsch, Max Holscher and Bertolt Hunger, "Mordfall Lübcke: Das rechte Netzwerk von Kassel," *Spiegel Online*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/stephan-ernst-das-kasseler-umfeld-des-gestaendigen-im-fall-walter-luebcke-a-1274255.html>.

²⁶ According to security authorities, a car registered to his father-in-law was seen at right-wing extremist events between 2000 and 2004, including meetings of the notorious neo-Nazi network "Aid Organisation for National Political Prisoners and their relatives" (*Hilfsorganisation für nationale politische Gefangene und deren Angehörige*, HNG), outlawed in 2011. See: Uwe Müller and Manuel Bewarder, "Stephan Ernst war offenbar Mitglied in völkischer 'Artgemeinschaft,'" *Welt*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article196039643/Mordfall-Luebcke-Taeter-tauchte-noch-2011-im-Umfeld-von-Neonazi-Truppe-auf.html>.

(*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD),²⁷ and pictures from 2002 show Ernst amongst the security team of a NPD rally in Kassel.²⁸ A drop-out from the scene described Ernst as a “very dangerous fellow” in those days.²⁹

Among his companions during that period are figures that have been associated with right-wing terrorism in other contexts. A picture from the aforementioned NPD rally shows the suspect with Stanley Röske, a man known today to German domestic security services as a leading member of the violent neo-Nazi group Combat 18 (C18) in Germany, considered to be a paramilitary arm of the internationally operating Blood and Honor network.³⁰

Ernst’s contacts with people from C18 also include Michel Friedrich of the Oidoxie Streetfighting Crew,³¹ a group which sees itself as a German branch of C18. Friedrich reportedly had contact with the right-wing terrorist Uwe Böhnhardt during the trial of the neo-Nazi murder trio National Socialist Underground (NSU).³² German C18 members maintained close ties to the NSU, and provided the group with practical support.

Another of Ernst’s longstanding associates, and one of his closest companions, was Mike Sawallich, former head of the Hessian “Young Nationalists” (*Junge Nationalisten*), the youth wing of the neo-Nazi NPD.³³ Sawallich was a member of the same neo-Nazi group, “Free Resistance Kassel” (*Freier Widerstand Kassel*), to which Ernst belonged until at least 2011.³⁴ In a video from 2007, Ernst, together with Sawallich and other neo-Nazi activists, can be seen attacking a DGB event in Kassel discussing “Old and New Strategies of the Extreme Right.” Ernst carried a sign with the inscription “Stop the demonization of German patriots,” and provoked Muslims among the counter-demonstrators, triggering a brawl.³⁵

²⁷ “Fall Walter Lübcke: Anwalt des Mordverdächtigen bestätigt Tatgeständnis,” *Spiegel Online*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/walter-luebcke-anwalt-des-verdaechtigen-aeussert-sich-erstmal-a-1274473.html>.

²⁸ “Tatverdächtiger im Fall Lübcke ist bekannter Neonazi,” EXIF - Recherche & Analyse (Blog), June 17, 2019, <https://exif-recherche.org/?p=6218>.

²⁹ Wolfgang Hausknecht, “Lübcke-Mord: Die rechtsextreme Welt des Verdächtigen Stephan E.,” *Merkur*, July 13, 2019, <https://www.merkur.de/politik/luebcke-mord-rechtsextreme-welt-verdaechtigen-stephan-e-12525475.html>.

³⁰ EXIF, “Tatverdächtiger.”

³¹ Friedrich belonged to the “Hardcore Crew Kassel” and admittedly had contact with Uwe Böhnhardt in the NSU trial. He claimed that he had left the neo-Nazi scene and had not seen Ernst since 2010. See: Ulf Lüdeke, “Nach Geständnis und neuen Verhaftungen: Ermittler leuchten Nazi-Netzwerk von Stephan Ernst aus - Experte warnt vor Irrtum,” *Focus Online*, June 26, 2019, https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/nach-gestaendnis-und-neuen-verhaftungen-ermittler-filzen-nazi-netzwerk-von-stephan-ernst-doch-experte-warnt-vor-fatalem-irrtum_id_10875674.html.

³² Kira Ayyadi, “Mordfall Lübcke Der Mörder Stephan Ernst war kein „einsamer Wolf“, er war Parteisoldat,” *Belltower News*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.belltower.news/mordfall-luebcke-der-moerder-stephan-ernst-war-kein-einsamer-wolf-er-war-parteisoldat-87065/>.

³³ Uwe Müller and Alexej Hock, “Mordfall Walter Lübcke: Top-Neonazi solidarisiert sich mit inhaftiertem Stephan E.,” *Welt*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.welt.de/politik/article195661515/Mordfall-Walter-Luebcke-Top-Neonazi-solidarisiert-sich-mit-inhaftiertem-Stephan-E.html>.

³⁴ Bongon et al., “Wer ist Stephan E.?”

³⁵ Robert Bongon and Martin Schneider, “Exklusiv: Video zeigt mutmaßlichen Lübcke-Mörder Stephan E.,” *Panorama*, *NDR*, June 18, 2019, <https://daserste.ndr.de/panorama/aktuell/Exklusiv-Video-zeigt-mutmasslichen-Luebcke-Moerder-Stephan-E,luebcke116.html>.

The close friendship between Sawallich and Ernst is revealed in a picture posted by Sawallich on Facebook, subtitled “the best comrade,” where Sawallich and Ernst can be seen standing arm in arm. The date of the post, June 21, 2019, falls between the capture of Ernst and his confession, allowing room for speculation that Sawallich may have been familiar with Ernst’s deed.³⁶

As it later became known, Ernst was a member of the German neopagan neo-Nazi group *Artgemeinschaft* (“Racial Community”) until 2011, which was founded in 1951 by Wilhelm Kusserow, a figurehead of Germanic neopaganism during the Nazi era.³⁷ Ernst may have taken part in their annual meeting in Ilfeld, Thuringia at the “Summer Solstice,” where he may have met people from the environment of the NSU.³⁸

Little is known about Ernst’s neo-Nazi affiliations in the early 2010s but, at some point, he seems to have shifted his activities online. Investigators have found in his mobile phone data numerous inflammatory comments in social networks, particularly on YouTube. In 2018, under the alias “Game Over,” he is said to have written on the platform “Either this government will abdicate shortly or there will be deaths.”³⁹ Ernst had reportedly also supported the far-right AfD party, since, according to media reports, he had donated €150 to the party in December 2016 with the transaction detail “campaign donation 2016 God bless you.”⁴⁰

Accomplices

While Ernst was very likely the murderer of Walter Lübcke, initial assumptions of him being the only perpetrator collapsed quickly, as on the night of the murder, a neighbor saw *two* cars speeding away from the crime scene after hearing gunshots.⁴¹

This testimony was confirmed, when, in Ernst’s apartment, investigators found the key to another car that was eventually found about one kilometer from Ernst’s apartment. It had a Thuringian license plate and is said to have been registered in the name of Ernst’s father-in-law. Ernst is said to have purchased the car shortly before the night of the crime.⁴²

Finally, at the end of June, two other suspects, Markus Hartmann and Elmar Johannwerner, were captured. Both individuals had allegedly arranged for the procurement of the murder weapon and

³⁶ Baumgärtner et al., “Mordfall Lübcke.”

³⁷ The *Artgemeinschaft* excluded Ernst in 2011 because he had no longer paid his membership fees. See: Müller and Bewarder, “Stephan Ernst;” “Mordfall Walter Lübcke: ‘Einer der besten Kameraden,’” *taz*, June 20, 2019, <https://taz.de/Mordfall-Walter-Luebcke/!5603834/>.

³⁸ “Stephan Ernst war offenbar Mitglied in völkischer ‘Artgemeinschaft,’” *Welt*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article196039643/Mordfall-Luebcke-Taeter-tauchte-noch-2011-im-Umfeld-von-Neonazi-Truppe-auf.html>.

³⁹ “Getöteter Regierungspräsident: Was wir im Fall Lübcke wissen - und was nicht,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/walter-luebcke-rechtsextremismus-stephan-e-fakten-1.4490463>.

⁴⁰ Andreas Speit, “Tödlicher Schuss auf Walter Lübcke: Eine Spende mit Problempotenzial,” *taz*, June 18, 2019, <https://taz.de/Toedlicher-Schuss-auf-Walter-Luebcke/!5604292/>; Klingst et al., “Verdächtiger im Fall Lübcke.”

⁴¹ Knight, “Suspect in German politician’s murder confesses.”

⁴² “Ermittler befragten Anwohner: Fall Lübcke: Rätsel um gefundenen Skoda im Kasseler Stadtteil Forstfeld,” *HNA*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.hna.de/kassel/fall-luebcke-raetsel-gefundenen-skoda-kasseler-stadtteil-forstfeld-zr-12777422.html>.

are currently in pretrial detention.⁴³ Johannwerner is said to have sold the murder weapon to Ernst in 2016, with Hartmann mediating contact between the two men.⁴⁴ Where the weapons came from and who else bought weapons from Johannwerner is still being investigated.⁴⁵

It was revealed only in late August 2019 that, in the extended network surrounding Ernst, Hartmann and Johannwerner, the police found not just five, but at least 46 firearms.⁴⁶ A spokesperson of the German Interior Ministry confirmed that these included guns, a submachine gun, rifles and machine guns, as well as “other items such as Chinese firecrackers, knives and sports bows”—enough weapons to equip a small militia.⁴⁷ This arsenal was seized from June 8 to July 19, 2019 in over 30 raids and house searches in Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Baden-Württemberg, while the public was fobbed off with trivializations, such as Ernst having acted alone.⁴⁸

Parliamentarians were informed about these findings in late August, but only after an official inquiry by the Bundestag delegate of the Left Party, Martina Renner, had been conducted, along with her parliamentary group.⁴⁹

Markus Hartmann

Accusations of withholding relevant information from government authorities and the public also concern the Hessian Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Hessisches Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, LfV Hesse). The latter not only kept a file on Stephan Ernst, but also on his accomplice, Markus Hartmann, who had helped Ernst to procure the murder weapon.

The LfV Hesse had apparently withheld relevant information from local weapon’s authorities, while they were establishing Hartmann’s eligibility to receive a firearms license. Hartmann had applied twice for such a license, in 2007 and 2012 respectively, but his applications were denied both times by the City of Kassel because of Hartmann’s right-wing extremist background. He appealed the verdict that was issued, and ultimately won the case in 2015.

⁴³ Lars Wienand, “Erika Steinbach heizte Hass auf Walter Lübcke neu an,” *T-Online.de*, June 6, 2019, https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/id_85876452/erika-steinbach-fachte-hass-auf-walter-luebcke-neu-an.html; “Arrests, weapons seizures tied to German politician’s killing as rally held,” *Deutsche Welle*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/arrests-weapons-seizures-tied-to-german-politicians-killing-as-rally-held/a-49370981>.

⁴⁴ Kampf, “Mord an Walter Lübcke.”

⁴⁵ Georg Mascolo, Katja Riedel and Ronen Steinke, “Kasseler Regierungspräsident: Walter Lübcke: Ein Mord und seine Vorgeschichte,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/mord-luebcke-gestaendnis-regierungspraesident-kassel-1.4515112>.

⁴⁶ Der Tagesspiegel, “Mordfall Lübcke.”

⁴⁷ “Insgesamt 46 Stück: Fall Lübcke: Mehr Waffen gefunden als bisher angenommen,” *HNA*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.hna.de/kassel/fall-luebcke-mehr-waffen-gefunden-bisher-angenommen-zr-12931031.html>.

⁴⁸ “Durchsuchungen: Polizei stellte 46 Waffen bei Beschuldigten im Mordfall Lübcke sicher,” *Spiegel Online*, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/mordfall-walter-luebcke-polizei-stellte-46-waffen-bei-beschuldigten-sicher-a-1282885.html>.

⁴⁹ “Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Martina Renner, Petra Pau, Dr. André Hahn, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion DIE LINKE. – Drucksache 19/11872 – Der Mord an Walter Lübcke,” Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 19/12553, August 21, 2019, <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/125/1912553.pdf>.

A decisive factor that precipitated the 2015 verdict was the LfV Hesse government's statement that there were no findings with regard to Hartmann speaking out against his "reliability in the sense of the Weapons Act."⁵⁰ The court itself had "no doubt" that the plaintiff had been active within a right-wing extremist environment. However, events that took place more than five years ago did not trigger the "assumption of the unreliability rule."⁵¹

Upon requests received from the press, a spokesman for the Ministry of the Interior pointed out that the Office for the Protection of the Constitution was only allowed to disclose freely accessible but not classified information; otherwise, such information could become public in court and "endanger the operational work of the security authorities," which potentially suggests that security authorities have not revealed everything they knew about Hartmann's neo-Nazi activities.⁵²

This assumption seems to be further supported by evidence indicating that, between 2015 and 2019, four "unannounced storage controls" of the weapons at Hartmann's house were performed by security officers, but "without complaint," according to Hesse's Interior Minister, Peter Beuth. This figure, i.e., the four unannounced storage controls, is considerably more often than gun owners are normally subjected to by authorities, so apparently the LfV Hesse had Hartmann on their radar all those years.⁵³

Although, compared to Ernst, much less is known about Hartmann's neo-Nazi past, the evidence available suffices for raising questions concerning why the LfV Hesse did not share these details with the authorities responsible for establishing Hartmann's right to hold firearms.

According to a Hessian Left Party member and expert on interior affairs, Hermann Schaus, Hartmann is "no stranger" in the right-wing extremist scene. Beginning in the early 1990s, Hartmann was already a member of the outlawed neo-Nazi Free German Workers' Party (*Freiheitliche Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*), the most extreme neo-Nazi party of the 1980s and early 1990s, and had also been listed as particularly dangerous in a report by the LfV Hesse.⁵⁴ In 2006, Hartmann had been convicted of using the emblem of an anti-constitutional organization, and, in the same year, had reportedly shouted "Sieg Heil" in a restaurant while performing Hitler's salute. He had participated in NPD events until at least 2009, when he was arrested for aggravated assault during a neo-Nazi demonstration in Dortmund, but the accusations were eventually dropped.⁵⁵

Like Ernst, Hartmann is said to have been a member of the neo-Nazi comradeship Free Resistance Kassel (*Freier Widerstand Kassel*, FRK), a group repeatedly mentioned in domestic intelligence reports. For example, pictures show Hartmann holding an FRK banner during a neo-Nazi march in Dresden in 2009, together with the aforementioned Mike Sawallich, one of Stephan Ernst's closest companions.

⁵⁰ Julian Staib, "Mordfall Walter Lübcke: Schwere Vorwürfe gegen Hessischen Verfassungsschutz," *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/mordfall-walter-luebcke-wann-wenn-nicht-dann-16346565.html>.

⁵¹ Staib, "Mordfall Walter Lübcke."

⁵² Staib, "Mordfall Walter Lübcke."

⁵³ Konrad Litschko, "Politischer Mordfall Lübcke: Aus dem Blick verloren," *taz*, June 27, 2019, <https://taz.de/Politischer-Mordfall-Luebcke/!5603731/>.

⁵⁴ Litschko, "Politischer Mordfall Lübcke."

⁵⁵ Staib, "Mordfall Walter Lübcke."

By now, the German Federal Supreme Court (*Bundesgerichtshof*, BGH) has solidified the accusations against Hartmann as an accessory to murder. According to the judges, Ernst and Hartmann, who knew each other from the Kassel neo-Nazi scene, seem to have radicalized together at the latest from 2014 onwards, took part in right-wing demonstrations, and visited the same gun range. The BGH believes the two friends planned to “arm themselves and become active now in order to challenge the political and social developments in Germany, which in their view were questionable.”⁵⁶

Possible connection to the neo-Nazi group National Socialist Underground

Despite Ernst and Hartmann’s numerous connections to the neo-Nazi scene and the weapons caches that have been found, the federal government continues to rule out a terroristic background to the murder.⁵⁷

This certainly spurs on the rumor mills, particularly in relation to Ernst’s potential connections to the neo-Nazi terrorist group National Socialist Underground (*Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund*, NSU), convicted of a racist murder series between 2000–2006. Ernst’s name has reportedly been mentioned by the Hessian investigation committee (*NSU-Untersuchungsausschuss*) that was assembled following the NSU’s alleged murder spree of ten people with migrant backgrounds.⁵⁸

The NSU investigation committee had, in 2015, requested the file that the domestic intelligence service kept on Ernst, but was denied access to it at the time.⁵⁹ Committee member Janine Wissler of the Left Party said that they had repeatedly asked for Ernst’s file, but to no avail. The respective authorities now claim that this was due to a formal error, since the committee members apparently had not filed the paperwork correctly.⁶⁰

Speculations about Ernst’s connections with the NSU also relate to one of their alleged murders that until today has not been solved. From the ten murders allegedly committed by the NSU between 2000 and 2006, one took place in the City of Kassel, in Walter Lübcke and Stephan Ernst’s home district. Halit Yozgat, a man with a migrant background, was shot at close range in his family’s internet café in 2006 by a still-unidentified killer. The perpetrator may or may not have been one of the three key NSU members, two of whom have since allegedly shot themselves, with the third remaining member, Beate Zschäpe, refusing to speak on the matter at all while in detention.

One of the initial suspects in the Yozgat murder was Andreas Temme, an agent of the state intelligence agency in Hesse, answering to Walter Lübcke’s office, whose presence in the internet cafe around the time of the murder has been established. Temme’s job profile at the time had been to surveil right-wing extremist circles in the Kassel region.

⁵⁶ Kampf, “Mord an Walter Lübcke.”

⁵⁷ “Kein Hinweis auf Terrorgruppe,” Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, Deutscher Bundestag, August 28, 2019, <https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/655686-655686>.

⁵⁸ Wienand, “Erika Steinbach.”

⁵⁹ “Stephan Ernst hatte langes Vorstrafenregister,” *Hessenschau*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.hessenschau.de/politik/sondersitzung-im-landtag-stephan-ernst-hatte-langes-vorstrafenregister,luebcke-innenausschuss-100.html>.

⁶⁰ Hessenschau, “Stephan Ernst hatte langes Vorstrafenregister.”

That he must have been present at the crime scene when the murder happened is reflected in the metadata of the computer Temme used,⁶¹ statements made by four other people besides Yozgat that were present at the internet cafe at the time, and has also been established by the presiding judges themselves. The judges argued that “while Temme had been present in the back room of the internet café at the time of the murder, it was possible [for him] not to have witnessed the killing from that position.”⁶²

Temme nonetheless testified shortly after being brought in for interrogation that he had not noticed anything unusual when leaving the cafe: no blasts, no smell of gunpowder, and certainly not the dead body of 21-year-old Yozgat behind the front desk, slaughtered there by three muffled gunshots. This case has since inspired an independent team of forensic specialists to get at the bottom of the story, which has come to the conclusion that Temme was likely either the murderer or was present when the murder was committed by someone else.⁶³

In any case, the episode shed an unflattering light on Hesse’s domestic intelligence agency, and allegations of the involvement of elements of the German interior secret services with the NSU have been rampant ever since.

As various investigators have pointed out, the NSU trio, built on the structure of Combat 18,⁶⁴ was always a breath away from a network of liaison officers (*V-Leute*) who could have been hardly unaware about the NSU’s activities. Besides the murder spree, these included a bomb attack committed in Nuremberg in 1999, bomb attacks in Cologne in 2001 and 2004, and a series of 14 bank robberies.⁶⁵ Amongst the network of up to 200 people who are believed to have helped the trio live undetected for over a decade, several members were in direct contact with honeypots and intelligence agents.

Subsequently, an internal report released by the State Office for the Protection of the Constitution has caused quite a stir. The service endeavored in the report to examine whether it had overlooked references to the NSU between 1992 and 2012, or if it had committed other mistakes in the fight against neo-Nazism. Links to the NSU in this regard were not found; and yet, the service admitted that it had not followed up on leads that certain right-wing extremists were in possession of weapons and explosives.

Even more peculiar, however, was the retention period associated with the report, which specified that the document should be hidden from the public eye for as long as 120 years: a timespan that is unusually high when it comes to German retention regulations. In most federal states, and also in the federal government, much shorter deadlines apply.⁶⁶

⁶¹ “A German Intelligence Agent Was at the Scene of a Neo-Nazi Murder. He Can’t Explain Why.,” *The Intercept*, October 18, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/10/18/germany-neo-nazi-murder-trial-forensic-architecture/>.

⁶² The People’s Tribunal Unraveling the NSU Complex, “The Murder of Halit Yozgat,” Forensic Architecture, June 8, 2017, <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-murder-of-halit-yozgat>.

⁶³ The People’s Tribunal Unraveling the NSU Complex, “The Murder of Halit Yozgat.”

⁶⁴ “NSU-Prozess: Die Rolle der “Combat-18”-Zelle,” *Der Spiegel*, June 11, 2014, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/nsu-prozess-in-muenchen-zu-mord-in-dortmund-a-1001474.html>.

⁶⁵ “Graphic: Trail of Hate,” *Spiegel Online*, February 23, 2012, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/graphic-trail-of-hate-a-817215.html>.

⁶⁶ 30 years are the average, while sensitive and classified information can usually be accessed after 60 years. If there are references in the file to intelligence personnel, they can only be accessed ten years after their

Now that it has transpired that Stephan Ernst's name has reappeared in the context of the NSU investigations of 2015, in which he was found likely to have committed a murder with the help of a support network, the retention period for the files concerning the NSU case was suddenly changed to 30 years,⁶⁷ a move that can hardly be considered anything but a PR stunt.

Combat 18

Since allegations have emerged indicating that Stephan Ernst had contacts with members of the neo-Nazi hooligan group Combat 18 (C18), the German Ministry of the Interior has set about discussing whether to crack-down on the group.⁶⁸ C18's sister organization, Blood and Honor, had already been banned in Germany by the year 2000, but the German government admitted in 2016, after an official inquiry by the Left Party in the course of the NSU investigation, that it had resumed following the activities of C18 in 2013.⁶⁹

The NSU trio itself was part of the Blood and Honor network, and built on the paramilitary structure of C18.⁷⁰ It was also C18 members, who, in 1998, helped the NSU trio to go underground in Saxony. C18 has its origins in the UK when, in early 1992, the far-right British National Party (BNP) formed the group as a security team to protect its events from attacks by anti-fascists. Its founders included the neo-Nazis Charlie Sargent and Harold Covington, an important American representative of the right-wing extremist scene. The name of the group is a thinly veiled allusion to the name Adolf Hitler, with the initials A and H, the 1st and 8th letter of the alphabet, being represented by numbers.

C18 soon garnered national attention for its violence against immigrants, members of ethnic minorities and leftists. At this time, C18 groups are reportedly active in France, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Hungary, Serbia, and Greece, and C18 members seem to be connected to far-right parties in their respective countries (e.g., the NPD in Germany, the Golden Dawn in Greece etc).

In Germany, connections between the NPD, C18, and the NSU are manifold, as are their connections to right-wing terrorism. A perfect example is the neo-Nazi and local NPD politician Ralf Wohlleben, who not only acquired weapons for the NSU, but, together with other C18 members, was also involved in the preparation of terror attacks in South Tyrol in the late 2000s, as the findings of the Italian secret service Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Interna (AISI) revealed.⁷¹ Four neo-Nazis, amongst them the Thuringian NPD member Frank Schwerdt, are said to have discussed attacks on

death. If the time of death is unknown, the protection ends 100 years after the person's birth. See: Susanne Höll, "Leise rieselt der Staub," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 2, 2017, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/nsu-prozess-leise-rieselt-der-staub-1.3570171>.

⁶⁷ Hessenschau, "Stephan Ernst hatte langes Vorstrafenregister."

⁶⁸ Ben Knight, "Combat 18: The neo-Nazi network facing a ban in Germany," *Deutsche Welle*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/combat-18-the-neo-nazi-network-facing-a-ban-in-germany/a-49493000>.

⁶⁹ "Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Martina Renner, Frank Tempel, Sevim Dağdelen, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion DIE LINKE – Drucksache 18/10463 – „Blood and Honour“ und „Combat 18“ in Deutschland," Deutscher Bundestag, December 22, 2016, <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/107/1810757.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Der Spiegel, "NSU-Prozess."

⁷¹ "Neonazi Norman Bordin droht MdL Susanna Tausendfreund," Bündnis 90/Die Grünen im Bayerischen Landtag, December 6, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130609050748/http://www.gruene-fraktion-bayern.de/themen/demokratie-und-buergerrechte/rechtsextremismus/neonazi-norman-bordin-droht-mdl-susanna-tausen>.

shops, such as kebab booths, with members of the group “Skinheads Tyrol – Section Meran.” To this end, Wohlleben is said to have brought €20,000 to Italy in 2009. The recipients, Alexander and Patrick Ennemoser, were both C18 members.⁷²

Another person at the juncture between Blood and Honor, NPD, and NSU is the militant neo-Nazi Thorsten Heise, a former regional chairman of the NPD, who has a considerable criminal record as well. Heise ran a mail order company selling Blood and Honor records and fan articles and, according to the Federal Criminal Police Office, has “proven contacts to perpetrators or defendants” in the NSU trial.⁷³

A further nexus between C18 and NPD is Peter Borchert, a former regional chairman of the neo-Nazi party and member of the C18 chapter Pinneberg, repeatedly convicted of violent assault and several violations of the weapons law.⁷⁴ That C18 in Germany is mostly affiliated with the NPD is furthermore shown by the fact that its members regularly serve as security guards at the party’s rallies, as Ernst once did.

As concerns the German C18 members, it is now known that they complete their training with sharp weapons.⁷⁵ In September 2017, twelve neo-Nazis were captured by the police at the Czech border, who were on their way back from visiting a shooting range and were attempting to smuggle ammunition back into Germany.⁷⁶ Among them numbered Stephan Ernst’s personal companion and prominent C18 figure Stanley Röske.

C18 groups in other countries seem to be equally prone to violence. For example, in March 2018, a C18 “Hellas” group was raided in Athens, and 11 of its members were subsequently jailed. Knives, explosives and Nazi flags were confiscated from the group at that time. According to a police report, the group emerged in 2010 and so far had been found responsible for at least 30 crimes, including explosive attacks on leftist hangouts and SYRIZA offices across the country.⁷⁷ In February 2017, C18 Hellas committed an arson attack on a left cultural center in Piraeus, at which time a meeting was being held. Five people were seriously injured.⁷⁸

⁷² Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, “Neonazi Norman Bordin.”

⁷³ René Heilig, “Hinweise auf laufendem Band,” *Neues Deutschland*, April 20, 2013, <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/819330.hinweise-auf-laufendem-band.html>.

⁷⁴ Andreas Speit, “Blut & Ehre & Rock’n’Roll,” *Jungle World*, April 20, 2005, <https://jungle.world/artikel/2005/16/15070.html>. “Bandidos’ verhaftet: Ist der Rockerkrieg jetzt vorbei?,” *Schleswig-Holsteinischer Zeitungsverlag*, April 27, 2010, <http://archive.md/20120910025527/http://www.shz.de/nachrichten/top-thema/article/111/polizei-nimmt-bandidos-in-neumuenster-fest.html#selection-719.0-725.33>.

⁷⁵ “Nazi-Terror auf der Spur - Wie gefährlich ist Combat 18?,” STRG_F on Youtube, July 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZAesIL5v70>.

⁷⁶ Nicole Schippers, “Verstoß gegen das Waffengesetz: Homberger Neonazi muss vor Gericht,” *HNA*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.hna.de/lokales/fritzlar-homberg/homberg-efze-ort305309/verstoss-gegen-waffengesetz-homberger-neonazi-muss-vor-gericht-9748259.html>.

⁷⁷ Philip Chrysopoulos, “Greek Police Seize Knives, Explosives, Nazi Flags After Combat 18 Raids,” *Greek Reporter*, March 9, 2018, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2018/03/09/greek-police-seize-knives-explosives-nazi-flags-after-combat-18-raids/>.

⁷⁸ STRG_F, “Nazi-Terror auf der Spur.”

In consideration of C18's proven propensity for violence, and its established connections to the National Socialist Underground as well as the alleged Lübcke murderer, Stephan Ernst, several German state interior ministers have meanwhile come out in favor of banning the group, but Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (CSU) has not yet taken a decision on the matter.⁷⁹

The ominous silence of Seehofer and German security agencies leaves room for many speculations and questions: why authorities would hesitate to ban a violent group such as C18, which obviously appears to be connected to right-wing terrorism, especially given the rise of right-wing crimes in recent years? An Interior Ministry report from September 2019 revealed that authorities registered a total of 8,605 right-wing offenses in the first half of 2019, which signaled an increase of 900 crimes. The domestic security agency (BfV) believes that there are approximately 24,000 right-wing extremists in Germany, of whom nearly 13,000 are considered to be "driven by violence."⁸⁰

In 2018, German investigators found over 1,000 weapons in raids of far-right groups—61% more than in the year before. The increase has been described as "frightening and alarming," by Matthias Quent, an expert on right-wing extremism at the Institute for Democracy and Civil Society (IDZ), and showed "a massive rearmament of Germany's right-wing radical scene."⁸¹

It has not just been German law enforcement and domestic intelligence agencies, however, that have warned of a right-wing extremist surge. According to a confidential Europol report commissioned by the Finnish Presidency of the Council of Europe, right-wing violence is on the rise in many EU countries.⁸² The Europol report notes with concern that "right-wing and right-wing extremist organizations and networks" are becoming "increasingly popular among younger and more educated demographics." At the same time transnational networking efforts by neo-Nazi groups are intensifying, particularly by violent neo-Nazi groups such as Hammerskins, Soldiers of Odin, Blood & Honour and Combat 18.⁸³

⁷⁹ Kaul and Mascolo, "Europol warnt vor rechten Gewalttaten."

⁸⁰ Martin, "Germany sees surge."

⁸¹ Martin, "Germany sees surge."

⁸² Darko Janjevic, "Europe's right-wing extremists try recruiting from police, army," *Deutsche Welle*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/europes-right-wing-extremists-try-recruiting-from-police-army/a-50557142>.

⁸³ Kaul and Mascolo, "Europol warnt vor rechten Gewalttaten."