An Outside Analysis of Right-Wing Extremism in the FRG (November 30, 1980)

Abstract

A terror attack allegedly carried out by right-wing extremists killed 13 people and wounded another 200 at Munich's Oktoberfest in 1980. The attack prompted a thorough analysis of the rise of right-wing radicalism in the Federal Republic. Right-wing radicalism covered a broad spectrum from the reactionary National Democratic Party to neo-Nazi youth gangs. The following article appeared in the Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

Source

Is Right-Wing Extremism Being Underestimated in the Federal Republic of Germany? The Munich Bombing Was a Sign

On the evening of September 26, just before 10:30 PM, a deadly bomb exploded amidst the festive, beer-filled party atmosphere of Munich's Oktoberfest. The bomb attack took place directly in front of the main entrance to the Oktoberfest grounds, where approximately 200,000 people were gathered at that moment; it claimed the lives of thirteen people and injured more than two hundred others, some seriously. The circumstances surrounding this bloody event have yet to be fully ascertained. It was clear from the beginning that it was a *terrorist attack*, and it was only a matter of hours before investigators discovered clues pointing to a suspect in the right-wing extremist scene. According to Federal Prosecutor General [*Kurt*] *Rebmann*, who is leading the investigation, there is now virtually no doubt that the bomb was planted by 22-year-old geology student *Gundolf Köhler,* who was himself torn to pieces in the blast. Traces of paint and metal particles were found in the basement of Köhler's parents' home in Donaueschingen, greatly compounding suspicions that the explosives had been assembled there. Köhler had had at least temporary contact with the right-wing extremist "Hoffmann Defense Training Group" [*Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann*], which was banned at the beginning of this year. Karl-Heinz Hoffmann, the leader of this group—which gained press notoriety above all through its paramilitary field exercises and Nazi slogans—was arrested after the attack, along with six of his followers. They were released a short time later, however, because there was not enough evidence linking them to the Munich bombing.

Unanswered Questions

Above all, two key questions remain unanswered: Did the alleged perpetrator Gundolf Köhler act *alone* or *in collaboration* with accomplices, and what was the exact motive for the bloody attack? Criminal investigators still favor the hypothesis that Köhler, the suspected perpetrator, *did not act entirely alone,* although no concrete evidence in support of this theory has been presented. As for the motive, speculations range from deliberate suicide—Gundolf Köhler was mired in personal difficulties—to a far-reaching, right-wing extremist terrorist conspiracy against German democracy in the heated lead-up to the Bundestag elections. By now, reports and statements take it as a given that the Munich bloodbath had its roots in the right-wing extremist scene, although the parents of the alleged perpetrator have protested, somewhat justifiably, that the press is labeling him guilty beyond doubt before a formal verdict has been rendered.

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Creating Public Awareness

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Recent events make clear that some right-wing activists no longer content themselves with restricted acts of violence; rather, they proceed directly to gruesome terrorist attacks. Over the course of the past year—in addition to the Munich attack—there have been at least *six bomb attacks* on Jewish memorials or admissions centers for foreigners. In August, two Vietnamese refugees were killed during an arson attack on a Hamburg *dormitory for foreigners*. Thankfully, the perpetrators of this crime have been arrested. Most of them were members of the so-called German Action Groups [*Deutsche Aktionsgruppen*]. The head of this right-wing extremist organization is the former lawyer *Manfred Röder,* who has since been taken into custody. In particular, these *violent acts against foreigners* indicate that right-wing extremist agitation is taking a new, political line of attack, the potential impact of which is disturbing.

According to the most recent report by the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) for the year 1979, the total number of right-wing extremist organizations is continuing to drop slowly, along with their membership rolls. This statistical trend is mainly attributable to the continued decline of the *National Democratic Party of Germany* (NPD), which presents itself in a democratic guise. With around 8,000 party members, it accounts for about half of the total membership of all right-wing extremist groups. In the Bundestag elections of October 5, the NPD received *67,000 votes*, a result that put its total share [of the vote] at about 0.2 percent, about half of what it was four years ago. In 1969, the NPD received 4.3 percent of the vote and thus only narrowly missed the threshold needed to win seats in the Bundestag. Thus, as a political alternative within the framework of democratic, parliamentarian rules, the extreme right seems to have become virtually insignificant in today's Federal Republic.

1,400 Activists

The opposite trend, however, can be seen in the country's *estimated thirty militant neo-Nazi groups,* whose activist membership base, according to the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution, comprised *1,400 people* at the end of 1979, a clear increase—40 percent—from 1978. Last year it was estimated that most extreme core group of these right-wing fanatics—who are increasingly *conspiratorial* in their plotting and who have, in some cases, advanced to openly terrorist crimes—comprised approximately 300 people. This circle may have expanded significantly since then. *Excessive acts of right-wing extremism* have also risen dramatically in the last three years; this category, however, also includes minor offenses such as displaying Nazi emblems (about 1,500 incidents were registered in 1979—50 percent more than in the previous year). The number of serious cases of right-wing extremist violence also doubled within a year, rising to 117. Courts and investigative agencies have reacted to this development, however: there were 365 convictions last year for offenses linked to right-wing extremism. In the trial against the terrorist group led by the German army lieutenant Michael Kühnen, who sought to resurrect the Nazi party, *long prison sentences* of four to eleven years were imposed for the first time. At the moment, several hundred preliminary proceedings are being held in connection with incidences of right-wing extremism. The objection that is sometimes raised—that a certain blindness prevails in the Federal Republic when it comes to the dangers of the right—seems to be misplaced, at least with respect to the German judiciary.

There are, however, those politicians who cannot easily deflect the accusation of having underestimated the growing danger of right-wing extremist activities. Until the Munich bloodbath, Interior Minister [*Gerhart*] *Baum,* who is responsible for security services, had been more or less openly charged with deliberately exaggerating the dimensions of right-wing extremism in order to divert attention away from his own lack of success in combating left-wing terrorism. It was surely ill-advised for Bavarian Interior Minister [*Gerold*] *Tandler* to have criticized his Bonn colleague Baum at the beginning of September for having exaggerated the "shadow threat" of right-wing extremism beyond what was actually warranted

by reality. Earlier quotes on right-wing extremism by [*Franz Josef*] *Strauss* have also been in circulation. After the Munich blast, these quotes make it seem as though he downplayed the danger, and they most probably hurt him severely in the final phase of the election campaign.

Agitation against Foreigners

Until the most recent terrorist attacks, however, it was difficult, even for neutral observers, to regard neo-Nazi agitation as anything more than the confused sectarianism of a few hopelessly isolated, small clusters. It is true that the right-wing extremist weekly *Deutsche National-Zeitung* has been published for years for a readership of about 100,000, and that a dense journalistic thicket of extremist off-shoots has been thriving in this right-wing corner. But for a long time, the primitive slogans of the extreme right—which reveal no cohesive concept, but rather, only a confused mishmash of theatrical Nazi glorification, rabid antisemitism and anti-communism, as well as a disdainful rejection of parliamentary democracy—have barely found any broad resonance beyond the circle of old Nazis, which is already shrinking for biological reasons alone.

Even in the 1970s, when more young people started surfacing among the ranks of violent neo-Nazi groups, no one really believed in the existence of a *movement of sympathizers* that had to be taken seriously, something comparable to the left-wing terrorist movement that sparked such heated discussion in this country. It the meantime, however, the militant right seems to have expanded its base of like-minded supporters—which, quantitatively speaking, was also very limited up to this point—through *focused agitation against foreigners* in the Federal Republic. West Germany is presently home to almost 4.5 million foreigners (about 7.5 percent of the total population), who, in view of increasingly dismal economic prospects and growing unemployment faced by many Germans, are less readily accepted than in the earlier boom years. The foreigner problem has been exacerbated by the overwhelming tide of *asylum seekers,* mostly from *Turkey* and the *Third World.* It is estimated that well over 100,000 of them will come this year alone. The social dissatisfaction that, here and there, is being loudly voiced will doubtlessly supply right-wing fanatics with their most dangerous explosive.

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Source: R. M., “Unterschätzter Rechtsextremismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland? Das Signal des Münchner Bombenanschlages,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 30, 1980. © *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. All rights reserved.

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