

Hanau Shootings Highlight Rise of Far-Right Extremism in Germany



Candles are placed around the Brothers Grimm monument during a vigil for the victims of a shooting in Hanau, near Frankfurt, Germany, Feb. 20, 2020.



Hesse's state Premier Volker Bouffier speaks during a news conference following a shooting in Hanau near Frankfurt, Germany, Feb. 20, 2020

Prior to carrying out the attack, the 43-year-old suspected attacker published a manifesto and a video online, expressing his anti-immigrant sentiments and his hatred of Muslim countries.

The German official, who requested anonymity, added that “the problem is that we don't only have old right-wing extremists, but now there is a new generation of lone actors.”

There has been an increase in attacks perpetrated by right-wing extremists, the official said.

In October, a gunman killed two people in Halle, Germany, after he unsuccessfully tried to enter a Jewish synagogue. Authorities said the attacker subscribed to far-right ideology.

Several months before that, a senior politician from the ruling Christian Democratic Union party was assassinated by a right-wing extremist in central Germany.

German media reported that last week a dozen extremists were arrested throughout the country for plotting to assassinate politicians and to kill immigrants.

Germany's domestic intelligence agency said that far-right extremists committed 10,105 violent crimes over the last decade. German law enforcement agencies have listed more than 12,000 people as far-right extremists.



FILE - Riot police watch as far-right supporters take part in an anti-refugee rally in Dortmund, Germany, June 4, 2016. A placard in front reads, "Stop the flood of asylum seekers."

Anti-immigrant sentiment

Sirwan H. Berko, a Germany-based journalist whose family migrated from Syria more than two decades ago, said racism has always been present in Germany but has been more salient in recent years.

"The influx of large numbers of refugees in recent years has fueled anti-immigration sentiments among far-right extremists in Germany," he told VOA.

Since 2015, Germany has received an estimated 1.3 million refugees, primarily Syrians fleeing their country's civil war.

"Far-right groups now have more access to mainstream media, which enables them to spread their hateful ideology," Berko said, adding that "racism and anti-immigrant sentiments, unfortunately, have been normalized in German politics and media."

Far-right groups such as the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) use immigration to mobilize young people and recruit extremists, he said.

Formed in 2014 as an anti-establishment force, the AfD adheres to a nativist ideology that is centered on anti-immigrant and anti-European integration stances. It has 89 seats in the German parliament, making it the third-largest political party in Germany.

Infiltrating state institutions

German media have reported that far-right recruitment has been taking place among German law enforcement and the military.



FILE - Far-right Pegida demonstrators, in the background, wave flags in front of the Frauenkirche, while counterdemonstrators stand in the foreground, protesting against the far-right demonstration in Dresden, Germany, Feb. 17, 2020.

But a spokesperson for the Military Counterintelligence Service (MAD) told VOA in a recent interview that the military was expanding its cooperation with German security authorities and international partners to analyze links and connections of suspected right-wing extremists to try to expose them.

“There is no place whatsoever for extremists in any form, but especially right-wing extremists, in the [German military] with its over 250,000 members,” said the MAD spokesman, who insisted on anonymity.

He added that the military had taken several approaches to prevent infiltration by far-right extremists, including carrying out 16,000 security checks annually for all its applicants.

Fabian Virchow, a professor at the University of Applied Sciences Düsseldorf and director of the Research Unit on Right-Wing Extremism, said that many far-right groups see police and the military as attractive recruitment grounds to expand their membership and enforce their ideology.

As an example, Virchow said, the ADF has named a number of police officers as its leading personnel.

“Far-right extremists guess rightly that these two bodies are, on average, more conservative than the rest of the society. This refers mainly to the idea of law and order, which from the perception of many has been violated, especially during the crisis of the migration regime in 2015,” he told VOA in a previous interview.

According to media reports, more than 550 German soldiers have been implicated in right-wing extremism.

This “indicates that Germany’s military structures have been infiltrated by dangerous individuals with access to weapons and advanced training,” said Vera Eccarius-Kelly, a professor of political science at Siena College in New York state.

“Not enough has been done to identify and remove these xenophobic extremists from the military structures,” she told VOA.

Ezel Sahinkaya and Rikar Hussein contributed to this story from Washington.

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