

# No Place for Right-Wing Extremists in Ranks, German Army Says



FILE - Soldiers attend an oath-taking ceremony of the German army at the Defense Ministry in Berlin, July 20, 2019.

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As reports about the threat of far-right recruitment among Europe's law enforcement and military grow, German armed forces, or Bundeswehr, told VOA that they are working to keep far-right extremists away from their units or to remove them once they have been identified.

A spokesperson for the Military Counterintelligence Service (MAD) told VOA 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 Bundeswehr with its over 250,000 members," the MAD spokesman, who did not wish to be named, said.

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

"We also take other preventive measures, aiming to encourage an improved reporting culture within the units through advisories, talks and our own publications," the spokesperson added.



FILE - Members of the German army's special forces secure an area while demonstrating their skills in training in Claw, near Stuttgart, July 14, 2014.

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German media Sunday reported that the Bundeswehr had suspended an officer of its elite special forces, or Kommando Spezialkräfte, who had ties to right-wing elements. The *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper reported the officer and two other soldiers had been covertly investigated for months, which had exposed their neo-Nazi activities.

On Wednesday, outrage erupted on social media after the Bundeswehr posted on its Instagram channel a picture of a Nazi swastika uniform with the word “retro” on the top of it. Following the backlash, the Bundeswehr removed the post and apologized, saying its intention in the post was to show in the photo “a centuries-long influence of uniforms on fashion.”

VOA reached out to the German military officials for a comment on the officer’s suspension, but a Military Counterintelligence Service spokesperson said they were unable to comment on “specific operations.”

## **Far-right tendencies**

In recent years, some German officials and counter-extremism experts have cautioned against the rise in anti-Semitic and anti-immigration rhetoric among the country’s law enforcement following multiple reports of members showing far-right extremist tendencies.

Fabian Virchow, a professor at the University of Applied Sciences Düsseldorf and the director of the Research Unit on Right-Wing Extremism, told VOA 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, Alternative for Germany, a right-wing political party founded in 2013, 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 said.

The penetration of far-right extremists and neo-Nazis into Germany’s law enforcement gained attention in April 2017, when German army officer Franco A.

was accused of plotting a right-wing terror attack he seemingly hoped would be mistaken for Islamist extremism.



FILE - Soldiers of the German KSK attend an exercise close to Putgarten, Germany, Sept. 28, 2015.

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The chief of MAD, Christof Gramm, recently said 20 soldiers at Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK), the special forces command composed of soldiers selected from the Bundeswehr, are under investigation for suspicious ties to right-wing extremists.

Earlier this year, MAD admitted it had under-reported the numbers of alleged cases, saying it could be as many as 450, news magazine Der Spiegel reported. Of those cases, MAD said 64 were suspected of membership in the Identitarian movement, while another 64 were tied to Reichsbürger.

Originating in France and active in Germany since 2012, Identitarian is a right-wing movement asserting the need to preserve the “European” culture from immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants. Reichsbürger, another far-right group, does not recognize the legitimacy of the modern German state but instead believes in reviving the 1871 borders of the German empire.

Virchow, of the University of Applied Sciences Düsseldorf, said the risk of radicalization in the military has been downplayed. He said many officials fear that an investigation could lead to exposing structural problems with racism in the police.

“A very urgent task to do should be a scientific investigation of to what an extent police units hold racist and anti-Semitic ideas. To make sure that the police and the military, as the two armed structures in society, stay absolutely loyal to democracy and actively defend it is key,” he said.

## **Transnational issue**

Some experts say combating the threat of right-wing infiltration of the police will likely require collective action from European countries. They say similar reports of radicalization among law enforcement of other European countries show the

issue is transnational.



FILE - This Dec. 2, 2016, photo shows the headquarters of Europol in the Netherlands.

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The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, known as Europol, concluded that violence related to right-wing extremism was rising in many EU states, according to a confidential report cited by Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, one of the country's main daily newspapers, in September.

The report said the groups were pursuing military and police members to boost their "combat skills."

Daniel Koehler, the director of the German Institute in Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS), told VOA that by infiltrating law enforcement and the military of European countries, right-wing groups are trying to secure a long-term power base and shield themselves against any potential future repression by their governments.

"The hope to easily connect to soldiers and police officers ideologically is not that far off, since the far right's approach through patriotism, nationalism, anti-communism or even blatant racism and anti-Semitism, as well as a positive stance towards violence, might resonate with many others who feel attracted to serve in the military or police," Koehler said.

He said certain European countries have taken important steps in countering this potential threat, particularly in the United Kingdom, where mandatory training is provided to officers to more easily spot far-right radicalization.

However, "a more proactive approach" to embedding the concept of countering violent extremism (CVE) — actions to thwart extremist efforts to recruit, radicalize and mobilize followers to violence — within law enforcement "should be taken," he said.

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