

Haaretz v. 18.12.22

<https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2022-12-18/ty-article/.premium/germanys-far-right-coup-failed-but-these-experts-remain-alarmed/00000185-254e-d15f-adf7-774f37d20000>

Germany's Far-right Coup Failed, but These Experts Remain Alarmed

The Reichsbürger movement has been dismissed in some circles as a group of delusional pensioners who wanted to bring down the Berlin government. Those who study the German far right are concerned by a bigger trend

Theresa Weiß, 18.12.2022



A suspect arrested by German police earlier this month during a series of raids related to the far-right coup attempt that was foiled by German authorities. Credit: Michael Probst / AP

Germany, spring 2022. A castle in the sleepy spa town of Bad Lobenstein. A group meets with Heinrich XIII of Reuss. The 71-year-old prince is the proud owner of this fortified building in the rural state of Thuringia. Within, people are allegedly plotting to overthrow the German government situated some three hours to the north in Berlin.

They plan to arrest lawmakers in the Bundestag, execute the chancellor, assume control of the military and topple the very state of Germany. This assembled group, comprising both men and women, wants to form 280 “homeland defense” units as part of a new army. They have already assigned themselves future posts such as justice minister, chief of staff or head of state. They also have 100 weapons and hundreds of thousands of dollars at their disposal, and have already reached out to Russian officials.

Their coup attempt never took place, of course, after German security forces arrested the alleged conspirators in a well-planned operation on December 7. Twenty-five individuals were arrested, with 23 of them charged with being members of the far-right Reichsbürger movement, or Citizens of the Reich.

Its followers believe Germany is a Western-constructed corporation, not a sovereign country, and has no valid constitution. Therefore, they argue, the pre-1918 German empire, the Kaiserreich, is still in place. They generate their own passports, don’t acknowledge German legislation and refuse to pay federal taxes.

They could easily be labeled sad fantasists reenacting history in their little (or not so little) gardens. But experts on Germany’s far right say these people are dangerous and must not be underestimated.

Alexander Häusler is one of Germany’s leading experts when it comes to scientific research on the country’s far-right extremists – and he is alarmed. The Reichsbürger movement has the potential to become a terror group, he says.

Potential for violence

Despite the headlines that reverberated around the world, the German government was not in danger of actually being overthrown. No paramilitary battalions had been formed and the group’s plans were described as “somewhat vague.”

This becomes ever-more apparent as an internal parliamentary committee gathers more information on the Reichsbürger movement. Its plans are described as the “fantasies” of delusional people by one lawmaker who is sitting on the Bundestag panel. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests the group had a “high potential for violence.”

Although Häusler calls the alleged plot “insane” and says it never would have succeeded, he warns that this “doesn’t mean the movement isn’t dangerous.”

Miro Dittrich, founder of a research institute on far-right extremism and antisemitism, concurs, noting that the group had already reportedly held a shooting training exercise.

“This is the second time this year alone that terror has come from the Reichsbürger movement,” he adds, highlighting the group’s extremist methods. In April, for example, two police officers were

wounded when they tried to seize illegal weapons from a Reichsbürger member. For Dittrich, the group is a terrorist network that is quite prepared to kill.

Violence is not exactly a new development for the movement. In 2016, a police officer was murdered after being shot by a Reichsbürger member who didn't want to hand over his weapons.

The details that have subsequently emerged about the December 7 plotters are rather horrifying. They had a death list and planned to abduct German Health Minister Karl Lauterbach and "punish him" for his management of the COVID crisis. The news also just broke that 120 people in Germany knew about the group's plans, which suggests more arrests may be imminent.

Even though these numbers are larger than initially seemed likely, they still show that the alleged conspirators are a tiny, tiny minority in the federal republic. Indeed, many Germans took to social media and urged others not to overestimate a "group of delusional pensioners" who had no real power whatsoever.

That is not entirely true, though. One arrested group member, former far-right lawmaker Birgit Malsack-Winkemann, was still working as a judge at the time of her arrest. Even more concerning, she was also in possession of her entrance card to the Bundestag, where she sat as a member for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party from 2017 to 2021.

Other alleged members of the terror cell might now be retired, but they used to be generals, paratroopers, police officers. To say they didn't pose a threat is itself delusional, experts say.

"We see a broadening of antisemitic, far-right conspiracy believers ready to use violence against the system," says Häusler, based on his research into extremists.

The security agencies are certainly not underestimating the Reichsbürger movement or the far right at large either, as shown by reports from the German domestic intelligence service, the Verfassungsschutz.

According to the agency, Reichsbürger members talk in chatgroups about Jewish global conspiracies, rant about "Rothschild, who's behind it all," and debate whether Jews and Muslims should even be deprived of basic human rights.

"We're experiencing a high level of right-wing, extremist attitudes in the country," Häusler says. "It's concerning that several extremist movements are merging."

The data back up his concerns. The number of crimes committed by people identifying as Reichsbürger members doubled in 2021, from 599 in 2020 to 1,011 the following year, the Verfassungsschutz stated. In its latest report on the security situation in Germany, published in June, the agency said it believed that 21,000 individuals are now part of the group – a thousand more than a year earlier.

Altogether, over 2,000 Reichsbürger members are "ready to use violence" to accomplish their goals, the report warned. Häusler, however, says his research suggests that these numbers are in fact much higher.



The Reichstag building in Berlin, which right-wing extremists allegedly planned to storm armed with weapons. Credit: Markus Schreiber/AP

‘Disastrous alliance’

Dittrich shares his concern. “Some Reichsbürger Twitter channels that post strong antisemitic conspiracy theories are followed by more than 80,000 Germans,” he says.

He notes that the internet is bringing together people who believe in conspiracies such as QAnon, the anti-lockdown Querdenker movement and, of course, the Reichsbürger. Word travels quickly and cheaply online in these far-right echo chambers, reaching more and more people.

Häusler also sees this “disastrous alliance” forming among Germany’s various far-right movements.

Dittrich describes how conspiracy theories are becoming increasingly prevalent, offering a “sense of order,” reduced complexity and boosting self-esteem – since the believers think they are the ones with the answers while others are in ignorance. “The pandemic has worsened this situation because people felt powerless in the chaos around them,” he says.

Believing that they have figured out a “big conspiracy” about the federal government and awaiting orders on how to react – stop paying taxes, declare your own state, plan a coup – gives these people a sense of purpose, says Dittrich, explaining the groups’ growing popularity.

For over a week now, the former generals, police officers and judge who dreamed of overthrowing the government have been incarcerated. But is the raid really a success? Yes and no, according to Häusler.

“For years, the government has smiled upon those forces and didn’t take them seriously,” he says. Still, he deems the arrests important, saying they “sent a signal” to the far-right scene.

The German government called the raid one of the largest counterterrorism operations it ever staged, but Häusler cautions that it must be the start of a new approach.

Dittrich hails the operation a success for preventing a possible terror threat, but also says it must now act as a wake-up call.

“These people aren’t some crazy cranks – they mean it,” he says. “We should not concentrate on their absurd beliefs, but on their ideology that despises humanity.”