

In Germany, the far-right terror threat is coming from inside the guardhouse

[By Doug Saunders, columnist and European correspondent, *Globe and Mail*, Feb 21, 2020](#)

I know Hanau, a small city surrounded by forest on the river Main. It's a bustling hub that for centuries has attracted people from many cultures and religions to its factories, shops and military bases; its citizens have always been diverse and polyglot.

I know some of Hanau's leaders and thinkers, including its long-time mayor, Claus Kaminsky, and have talked with him about his plans to turn Hanau's huge abandoned U.S. army base into a new city centre that supports that diversity.

And I know there is not only unimaginable grief and horror in Hanau today, but also a special sort of fear.

The shooting massacre of at least nine Hanau residents on the night of February 19, reportedly at the hands of a local man who had become infected by online ideas picked up from popular political figures and commentators who target religious and racial minorities, brought that fear to the surface.

Hanau's most famous offspring, the Brothers Grimm, knew something of that fear – they portrayed it as a type of poison, tempting to some, that transforms troubled individuals but also seizes kingdoms and organizations, leaving death and hatred in its wake.

Hanau remembers this from 1938. By then, the toxin had seeped into many in the city, turning them into violent predators who attacked their neighbours on racial grounds. On an infamous day in 1938, a mob rampaged through the town and set its main synagogue ablaze. Only then did the poison's other form become fully apparent, when the police and fire department rushed to the scene only to save adjacent, non-Jewish-owned buildings from burning, enthusiastically allowing the synagogue to burn to the ground.

This is not 1938. Unlike then, only a sliver of people in this prosperous western end of Germany vote for parties of intolerance today. But that poison has been doing its work. The day of the massacre, German media reported that investigators had detained the leader of an online community that shared Nazi images and slogans and discussed attacks on Muslims, immigrants and minorities. He was a 35-year-old police official from Hesse, the state that contains Hanau (he had moved to Berlin last year).

Of the 50 members of the group suspected of participating in hate activities, Hesse officials believed that at least 38 were police officers. A survey of 17,000 Hesse police officers this month found that more than a quarter believe the conspiratorial fallacy that Germany would become “an Islamic country.”

A week earlier, federal prosecutors staged raids in six states to break up a nationwide terrorism network described as neo-Nazi that had been assembling a weapons cache while planning attacks on “politicians, asylum seekers and people of Muslim faith.” The group’s goal, according to federal prosecutors, was to “shock and ultimately overpower the state and social order of the Federal Republic of Germany.” At least one key figure in the group was a police official.

It’s the latest in a series of violent neo-Nazi and extreme-right groups that appear to have infiltrated the ranks of German police and military. In Frankfurt, next door to Hanau, five police officers are being prosecuted for running another online group that sent death threats to lawyers representing victims of far-right terrorism, including a threat to “slaughter” the infant daughter of one lawyer.

The ring called itself “NSU 2.0,” a reference to a terrorist organization, the neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground, that committed at least 10 killings and two bombings mainly aimed at minorities and immigrants, in a spree that ended in 2011. Some of the 100-odd people tied to the NSU also had ties to police, military and intelligence agencies.

In December, after a number of military officers were suspended for supporting extreme-right groups or giving Hitler salutes, federal officials announced the creation of a “central office for far-right extremists in the public service” to investigate the many cases of police, military and intelligence officials caught in far-right plots. Some say this office has done little so far.

This was how the politics of hate took over this country the last time: It did not emerge instantly as a mass political movement, but crept up within the ranks of the military and police, and in packs of self-motivated thugs.

This time, there is a late-dawning recognition of the poison and its powers. Chancellor Angela Merkel called it exactly that – “Racism is a poison, hate is a poison,” she said on Thursday – and her colleagues vowed that their conservative Christian Democratic Union would never work with the Alternative for Germany, a party that, in the words of the CDU leader, “tolerates right-wing extremists and Nazis in its ranks.”

But, in Hanau and beyond, there is a growing worry that many of the people meant to guard against such horrors are now part of the problem.