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Original text in German

“Die sind doch nicht dumm. Die nehmen ihr Handy natürlich nicht mit.”

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Arson attacks still unsolved. Investigators create culprit profiles.

There has been a whole series of arson attacks in Bremen¹, primarily against real estate companies. In the course of their investigative work, the police encountered a significant barrier.

In 2019, there was a series of regular arson attacks and property damage in Bremen, and five arson attacks have already been reported for the first half of 2020. Buildings and vehicles belonging to real estate companies have been the main targets, but the police have also been attacked on several recent occasions. These actions presumably come from left-wing extremists, at least this is what the communiqués indicate. To investigate the arson attacks, the police have set up a “fire” investigation group. However, they've had no success so far; not a single culprit has been identified. The reasons for this are explained by Senator of the Interior Ulrich Mäurer (SPD) and Head of the Criminal Investigation Department Jürgen Osmers in an interview.

In 2018, there were 119 arson attacks nationwide that were attributed to left-wing extremists, Mäurer cited from the Federal Criminal Police Office² statistics. “Do you know how many suspects were identified for all this? A total of two.” Something else is important to the Senator of the Interior on this point. He said that no one should believe that the issue of extremism is not taken seriously in Bremen. Since he took office, the staff of the State Protection Service³ has been increased from 35 to 75, and that of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution⁴ from 40 to 70. “Together with the Analysis Department, around 150 employees are now dealing with this,” says Mäurer.

¹*No Trace Project (N.T.P.) note:* in Germany

²*N.T.P. note:* Bundeskriminalamt (BKA).

³*N.T.P. note:* a department of the BKA.

⁴*N.T.P. note:* Germany's domestic intelligence agency.

No great prior knowledge is required

The extremely low rate of resolving these cases is neither a purely local matter nor a question of staffing, Mäurer emphasizes. Rather, he says, it is due to the crime: to carry out such an arson attack, no great prior knowledge is required, and the means to do so are available to anyone without restriction. “Totally simple stuff. Even children or teenagers could do it.”

But children or young people are not the ones setting fire to the buildings and vehicles. It is also unlikely to be left-wing chaotic people with a penchant for property damage. Rather, according to police estimates, those responsible are small groups of older people with life-experience and who are well-organized. For Osmers, the head of the Criminal Investigation Department, this is precisely the critical issue. The culprits acted deliberately and proceeded tactically, always careful not to leave any traces. From the preparation to the execution to the retreat, each phase of the crime is planned—up to the rehearsed behavior in case the security authorities are confronted.

“We therefore have very few starting points in these cases,” explains Osmers. There are rarely any usable traces after fires anyway, and there is no hope that surveillance cameras will help either. The arsonists act masked, dressed completely in black, and sometimes even have large umbrellas with them to prevent police learning about the way they walk or move.

The same is true with regard to digital traces, he said. Cell phones that allow investigators to determine the whereabouts of suspects at the time of the crime via cell antenna analysis? Osmers waves it off. “They’re not stupid. They don’t take their cell phones with them, of course.” And if a raid of an apartment does take place, nothing will be found on the suspects’ computers. “Everything that breaks the neck of normal criminals, we don’t have here.” There is not even bragging in the private sphere, which is quite common with other criminals, he said. “Those responsible simply act too conspiratorially for that”.

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It also does not help that the milieu of violent leftists in Bremen has been relatively solid and stable for years, which the Office for the Protection of the Constitution estimates is composed of around 200 people. “Observing the masses doesn’t get us anywhere here,” Osmers says. “It is unlikely to be those who are openly violent at demos.” For the arsonists, there is far too high a risk of being caught in those types of actions, he says.

Which, of course, does not mean that the police remain inactive. “We try to be just as organized in countering it,” Osmers emphasizes. “But we need a lot of persistence in cases like this, we have to put a lot of pieces together until maybe at some point a complete picture emerges.” Osmers did not comment on the details of this investigative work. It is obvious that the police do not limit themselves to the classic search for clues, but also create culprit and group profiles. They even use canine trackers in the pursuit of the arsonists.

Neither Mäurer nor Osmers think that Bremen, of all places, currently has a particularly big problem with left-wing extremists. “This issue also existed in the past under other coalitions,” says the Senator of the Interior. And there is no great distinction drawn between the parties, either, he adds. “We are all part of the repressive state apparatus that is being fought.” Osmers sums up the situation: “We face a strong challenge here. Like other big cities.”