

How QAnon helped inspire a plot to overthrow the German government

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German authorities arrested 25 people suspected of a right-wing extremist plot to overthrow the country's government on Wednesday. According to NBC News, the unnamed group, which includes veterans and a German descendant of a royal family, was inspired by "the so-called Reichsbürger, or Reich Citizens, movement which is motivated by conspiracy theories about the role and legitimacy of the modern German state." But German authorities also named a key foreign influence on the group's thinking: QAnon.

Reports about the suspected seditious group's belief system suggest strong parallels with QAnon-type thinking. German prosecutors said the group allegedly believes the country is governed by a secret "deep state" and that, among other things, they were allegedly planning to storm the Reichstag parliament building to install a new government. The members of the group also apparently believe the U.S. would at some point be part of a secret coalition of governments to assault the German deep state, which they saw as a path to liberation.

That connection might seem a bit odd. QAnon is the American far-right conspiracy theory that Donald Trump is on a secret mission to expose and execute a ring of Satan-worshipping liberal elite child traffickers. Why would Germans care about a preposterous myth about American politics?

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But QAnon has had significant currency abroad for years. QAnon-affiliated groups have surfaced across Europe, including in Britain, the Netherlands and the Balkans, and data indicates they have their biggest following outside America in Germany.

That's because QAnon serves as a useful tool for right-wing movements around the world to promote bigoted conspiracy theories and authoritarianism in thinly veiled terms. Social scientists and intelligence officials say that QAnon is a valuable technology for spreading ideas that naturally get traction on the German far right. As a New York Times report from 2020 explained, "the mythology and language QAnon uses — from claims of ritual child murder to revenge fantasies against liberal elites — conjure ancient anti-Semitic tropes and putsch fantasies that have long animated Germany's far-right fringe." As [Stephan Kramer](#), head of domestic intelligence in the eastern German state of Thuringia, told the Times,

“QAnon doesn’t openly fly the colors of fascism, it sells it as secret code.” It’s likely helpful for the far right that QAnon mythology can hint at antisemitic conspiracies (such as blood libel claims) without explicitly invoking Jews, avoiding the legal restrictions on hate speech in Germany.

What makes QAnon so worrisome is that it also has the capacity to gain purchase among people who we think of as far from fringe extremists. A great deal of polling in the U.S. shows that a huge proportion of Republicans, regardless of educational background, believe in QAnon tenets. How is this possible? One explanation is that if one doesn't take the theory literally, it's at its essence a story of the powerful conspiring against the innocent. No matter how abominable and misguided the details of the story are — or how toxic its proposed solutions to the problem — it's not hard to see how that kind of narrative can be compelling at a time of skyrocketing inequality, plunging confidence in institutions across the West, and rising inchoate anti-establishment movements. As political institutions strain to adapt to populist political formations and declining trust, it’s a potent — and dangerous — tool.

There's still a great deal to learn about this plot against the German state, but it's a reminder of how powerful fringe ideas can be. They can organize and move people to do great harm, no matter how obviously ludicrous they may seem to the rest of us.