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The Prince, the Plot and a Long-Lost Reich

Prince Heinrich XIII was arrested last week as the suspected ringleader of a plan to overthrow the German government. Nostalgic for an imperial past, he embraced far-right conspiracy theories.



By Erika Solomon and Katrin Bennhold

Erika Solomon traveled to Bad Lobenstein, a spa town about three hours south of Berlin, to report this story. Katrin Bennhold, who has written extensively on the far right in Germany, reported from Berlin.

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7 MIN READ

The crenelated hunting lodge of Prince Heinrich XIII of Reuss sits atop a steep hill, looking out over homes laced with snow and Christmas lights in Bad Lobenstein. Popular with the local mayor and many nearby villagers, the prince spent his weekends in the spa town, giving an aristocratic flair to this sleepy corner of rural eastern Germany.

But there was a darker side to his idyll.

Heinrich XIII, prosecutors and intelligence officials say, also used his lodge to host meetings where he and a band of far-right co-conspirators plotted to overthrow the German government and execute the chancellor. In the basement, the group stored weapons and explosives. In the forest that sloped beneath the lodge, they sometimes held target practice.

Last week the Waidmannsheil lodge, a three-hour drive south of Berlin in the state of Thuringia, was one of 150 targets raided by security forces in one of postwar Germany's biggest counterterrorist operations. By Friday, 23 members of the cell had been detained across 11 German states and 31 others placed under investigation. The police discovered troves of arms and military equipment as well as a list of 18 politicians and journalists deemed to be enemies.

Prince Heinrich XIII, 71, a well-off descendant of a 700-year-old noble family, may seem an unlikely ringleader of such a terrorist plot. But, prosecutors say, he was designated by his co-conspirators to become head of state in a post-coup regime.



Prince Heinrich XIII during his arrest on Wednesday. Boris Roessler/Picture Alliance, via Getty Images

Nostalgic for the pre-1918 German empire, when his ancestors reigned over a state in eastern Germany, he had openly embraced a conspiracy theory that has gained momentum in far-right circles: that Germany's postwar republic is not a sovereign country but a corporation set up by the Allies after World War II.

Followers of this conspiracy theory call themselves Reichsbürger, or Citizens of the Reich. And there are a lot of them in southeastern Thuringia, the state where the Nazis first won power locally more than 90 years ago, before going on to establish the Third Reich.

Today the state's biggest political force is the far-right Alternative for Germany party, or AfD — one of whose former lawmakers was arrested as part of the prince's alleged plot last week.

But it is the Reichsbürger who have brought Bad Lobenstein the most notoriety, to the chagrin of local hoteliers and vintners seeking to attract tourists to the area, where stone buildings and medieval church spires dot rolling landscapes of pine forests and lakes.

"They keep us pretty busy," said Andree Burkhardt, a local councilman. "But I could never have imagined we had a scene here that was that militant."

Whenever Mr. Burkhardt and his fellow council members set up a booth at the local market to hear locals' concerns, they end up facing a stream of verbal abuse from people insisting he is working for a country that does not exist.

"They yell at us and say: 'We are not Germans. We are not in a real German state! We are just a branch of a GmbH!'" he said, referring to the German

acronym for a limited liability company.

But the Reichsbürger seemed like only a local nuisance until Heinrich XIII appeared on the scene.



Andree Burkhardt, a councilman in Bad Lobenstein, who said some town residents accuse him of working for a country that does not exist. Ingmar Nolting for The New York Times

The prince pursued his goal of restoring Germany’s imperial Reich on multiple fronts, and in a way that almost seemed like he believed his fantasy realm already existed.

The editor of Bad Lobenstein’s local newspaper, Peter Hagen, first learned that the village had a prince in April 2021, when residents started telling him about strange campaign posters plastered on the streets beneath the Waidmannsheil lodge, urging residents to run for elections with the “Reuss election commission.”

There were no official elections at the time.

Mr. Hagen grew more suspicious this past summer after he followed Heinrich XIII and another local Reichsbürger figure to a municipal office, which the mayor at the time had allowed them to use for a lecture called “An information event on the BRD GmbH” — an acronym for the Federal Republic of Germany, Incorporated.

The title clearly implied a connection to Reichsbürger beliefs. But when Mr. Hagen arrived, the organizers refused to begin their meeting, and he was not able to listen to the lecture.



A meeting room in the City Hall of Bad Lobenstein. Ingmar Nolting for The New York Times

A sense of unease in Bad Lobenstein began to grow in July, when a letter arrived in people's mailboxes. It was punctuated with exclamation points and capital letters, urging them to use a website to register for citizenship under the House of Reuss. (Noble titles were abolished after World War I, but many erstwhile royal families avidly track their lineage.)

“Do you also have the feeling that something in this country isn't right?” the letter read. “Did you know that you actually are not in possession of any citizenship, that you are actually stateless and possess no rights?”

Bad Lobenstein is home to 6,000 people, and some say it feels more like a village than a town. Everyone knows each other, and the only cafe there sells out of pastries and coffee by noon. Within hours of receiving the letter, Mr. Burkhardt, the local councilman, realized he was not the only one who received it — everyone had.

He spoke to Mr. Hagen, and after trading what they had seen or heard, Mr. Burkhardt began to feel uneasy. “I thought: Maybe we should have this looked into. So we actually reported it to the domestic intelligence agency. They told us: ‘We're on the case.’ And I think honestly, they took it more seriously than I did.”



Peter Hagen, the editor of the newspaper in Bad Lobenstein. Ingmar Nolting for The New York Times

Intelligence officials had been watching the prince since the fall of 2021, and what they were discovering was far more sinister: The group of co-conspirators around Heinrich XIII included current and former soldiers from the elite special forces, police officers, army reservists and others with links to the military who had worked out concrete plans and even prospective dates for a coup, officials said.

Already twice this year the group appeared ready to act — once in mid-March and once in September, putting security agencies on high alert, but each time it postponed, intelligence officials said.

The prince recruited support not only in far-right circles close to the military. He also sought allies among fellow aristocrats, traveling to Austria and Switzerland to court German-speaking nobility for donations to finance his plot, officials familiar with his travels said. With the money he collected, his group bought satellite phones to communicate off the grid during and after the planned coup. The phones were later found at the lodge during the raid.

Heinrich XIII also made contact with Russian diplomats, aided by a younger Russian girlfriend, who has been identified by prosecutors only as Vitalia B. Several times, she facilitated meetings, though prosecutors say they had no evidence of a Russian response.

In the wake of the attack, Germany's interior minister plans to tighten gun laws to make it harder for extremists to access weapons.

It is unclear when and how Heinrich XIII was first radicalized, intelligence

officials say. He had been living in the wealthy Westend suburb of Frankfurt, where he worked as a real estate broker and consultant.



The road leading to the prince's hunting lodge remained blocked by the police on Thursday. Ingmar Nolting for The New York Times

By the time he started spending regular weekends in Bad Lobenstein last year, he was already deep inside the Reichsbürger movement. But his antisemitic tendencies and interest in conspiracy theories are well documented.

In January 2019, he gave a lecture at the WorldWebForum in Zurich titled “Experience the rise and fall of the blue-blooded elite.” In the 15-minute speech, he railed against the Rothschild family and claimed World War I was forced on the German kaiser by international financial interests — both common antisemitic dog whistles — insisting that modern democratic Germany was just an illusion.

“Ever since Germany surrendered on the 8th of May, Germany has never been sovereign again,” Prince Heinrich XIII said in his speech, referring to the day of its defeat in World War II. “It was made into an administrative structure of the allies in the so-called united economy entity, Federal Republic of Germany — in other words, a commercial structure.”

It was speeches like this that began to alienate him from relatives of the House of Reuss. The head of the Reuss family, a distant cousin who, like all male heirs to the Reuss throne, is also named Heinrich, called him “a confused old man” and pointed out that even if his coup had been successful, he was only 17th in line for

the throne.

“That means 16 of us would have to die before it is his turn,” he said, adding that what had propelled his distant cousin into his world of conspiracy was probably years of embitterment with the German courts.

After German reunification, Heinrich XIII spent years fighting legal battles to regain ownership of family manors and lodges that had been nationalized in the former Communist East Germany. “He never got any land restitutions,” the head of the Reuss family said, though the prince did manage to get back some of his family’s furniture and art.

Ultimately, Heinrich XIII had to buy back the lodge, ornately decorated with its carved stone boars and a gothic-looking tower.



Police officers on the grounds of the prince’s lodge on Thursday. Ingmar Nolting for The New York Times

Many in this far-flung town of former Communist East Germany share his sense of nostalgia — albeit for a very different kind of past.

Mr. Burkhardt said he was disturbed by how many local sympathizers of Reichsbürger beliefs expressed a longing for the days of Communist Germany and disdained the current German government, which is discredited in their eyes.

One local shopkeeper, who declined to provide her name, said she liked the prince — that he seemed “noble.” She was unsure whether the Reichsbürger plot to use violence was right or not. “But I think a lot of us here have this feeling,” she said. “It’s that, well — something here has to happen.”

Such sentiment has grown stronger since the pandemic, when conspiracy theories began to mushroom. Now, facing an energy crisis and the crushing blow of inflation, bitterness in Germany's poorer eastern regions is growing, and the governing elites can be an easy target.

Mr. Burkhardt did not have any firm estimates for how many people in town were active supporters of the Reichsbürger movement, but it was enough, he said, to make the place restless.

The raid, he said, was like a reckoning.

"It was about time," Mr. Burkhardt said.

Christopher F. Schuetze contributed reporting from Berlin.