

Panoply of the Absurd

Were the attacks on New York and Washington the biggest act of terrorism in history – or just an enormous secret service conspiracy? Conspiracy theorists are filling bestsellers with their supposed evidence, and they already have one-fifth of all Germans convinced of their half-truths.

The man with the shy smile who has been appearing in the dock in room 237 at the Hanseatic Higher Regional Court in Hamburg since August 14 is accused of being involved in a conspiracy. His name is Abdelghani Mzoudi, and he has been charged with assisting in the commission of murder - in 3066 cases - as a member of the secret terrorist group surrounding Mohammed Atta that changed the world with its attacks on September 11, 2001.

As soon as the representative of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, standing behind thick bullet-proof glass, had read aloud the results of the investigation against this 30-year-old Moroccan on the first day of the trial, his defense attorney, Michael Rosenthal, delivered a portrayal of a different conspiracy, one far more extensive, dangerous and monstrous than that of which his client is being accused: "It appears that the United States of America was already familiar with the political benefits of an attack on the World Trade Center, at least in theory, before it actually occurred."

Wasn't "a catastrophic and catalyzing event" precisely what US strategists had longed for? And hadn't George W. Bush and his people "implemented ... with astonishing speed ... geopolitical concepts that cannot be separated from an analysis of the attack?"

As the astonished whispers in a courtroom packed with reporters began to subside, Rosenthal quietly continued: "As I take a close look at the results of the investigations through my glasses, I find anomalies that are immediately apparent. They begin with passenger lists that include the Arabic names of people who are still very much alive today. And there are certainly other pieces of evidence that could give rise to some speculation."

One could certainly speculate. Most of all, one could speculate about Rosenthal's glasses.

Was this well-known attorney completely serious in suggesting that the American administration, to further its foreign policy objectives, did not even shy away from the mass murder of more than 3,000 people in its own country?

Federal Public Prosecutor Walter Hemberger was speechless. He said that he hoped Rosenthal did not "truly doubt that Atta & Co. were responsible" for the attacks. "If so," he continued "we are no longer on the same page here."

The defense attorney quickly modified his approach, claiming that he had only been trying to provoke the release of files that American investigators have thus far withheld from German authorities: "I had absolutely no intention of speaking out in favor of outrageous conspiracy theories."

However, that was precisely what he did, applying an air of social acceptability to those confused arguments that established publishing houses have been bringing to the people - with considerable success - in so-called non-fiction books for months. The authors of these books conjecture that the "geopolitical chess masters" in the White House may have sacrificed "two castles" to achieve "global dominance." They claim to be uncovering "the lies and fabrications of the media and secret services," as well as illuminating the role played by the CIA in international terrorism.

At the core, their analyses of "irregularities" lead to an allegedly "convincing counter-model for operation 9/11." The obvious conclusion: The American administration either staged the terrorist attacks itself or at least knowingly allowed them to unfold.

In his book "Operation 9/11 - An Attack on the Globe," author Gerhard Wisnewski, an employee of the German television network ARD, presents supposed evidence to support the theory that the Pentagon was destroyed by US missiles and that an aircraft never crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Like-minded former German minister Andreas von Bülow ("The CIA and September 11th") suspects that the towers of the World Trade Center could have been exploded from within. Mathias Bröckers, a former journalist with "taz," sees George Bush Jr. as the "true reincarnation of Hitler," and for this reason believes him capable of virtually any dastardly deed.

These supposed exposés have been successful with the public. Wisnewski was permitted to bring his psychic speculations to the public in the form of a film broadcast on the German television network WDR. Bülow's book climbed to the number 3 slot on the SPIEGEL bestseller list within a few weeks, and more than 100,000 copies of Bröcker's first conspiracy book have been published, making it the biggest sales coup in years for publishing house Zweitausendeins Verlag. The sequel has been available since July and is also expected to be very profitable.

The results of a Forsa survey conducted in April also indicate that this "running amok of an unbound constructivist fantasy" (Neue Zürcher Zeitung) has become a true peoples' sport in Germany. According to the survey, one-fifth of all Germans now believe "that the US government could have ordered the attacks of September 11th itself." 29% of respondents in the eastern portion of Germany and as much as 31% of Germans under 30 believe this statement.

The world also seems to have gone awry in other countries. In France, author Thierry Meyssan has sold about 200,000 copies of his book titled "L'Effroyable imposture" (translated title of the German version: "The Staging of Terrorism"). On the internet, thousands of web sites provide an international band of amateur sleuths with the opportunity to speculate about the supposed "truths" behind the "official" version.

The worst act of terrorism in history is entering the rarified atmosphere of those myths in which Elvis is alive, John F. Kennedy fell victim to a conspiracy involving the Mafia and secret service agents, the Moon landing was staged in the Nevada desert, and Princess Diana was murdered by the British intelligence services.

It's a panoply of the absurd and yet entirely of this world. Historian Dieter Groh writes that conspiracy theorists "represent a constant temptation for all of us" because they are a constant in western history. According to Groh, "the historical sequence before the French Revolution is one of Jews, heretics, witches, followed by Jews, Communists, capitalists, and secret services" after the revolutionary year of 1789.

As diverse as these theories and their adherents may be, they share a basic thought pattern: great tragedies must have great reasons. According to this way of thinking, it would be impossible for a small group of Islamists to strike such a damaging surprise blow against superpower USA, with all its weapons and intelligence services.

"The wonderful thing about a conspiracy theory is that it allows you to understand everything perfectly," says American political scientist Michael Barkun in an effort to explain the continued success of conspiracy theories. It "discloses to you that all the evil in the world can be attributed to a single cause, and that THEY are this cause, whoever they might be."

Of course, THEY - the Americans, in the case of September 11th - make things rather easy for those with a lot of imagination. That's because conspiracy theories, says Groh, only take hold when they come into contact with reality. To ensure that their "mechanism functions properly, they must fit into the prevailing interpretation patterns of a group, nation, culture or religion the way a key fits into a lock."

After all, didn't Bush and Blair deceive their fellow citizens, the United Nations, and the rest of the world with falsified or exaggerated threat scenarios to make it easier to send their soldiers to Iraq? What about Vietnam, the Iran Contra affair, and US support for Bin Laden and the Taliban when they were fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan?

And what about plans such as "Operation Northwoods" - a conspiracy plot hatched in 1962 by the US high command? Under this plan, a passenger aircraft flying over the Caribbean was to be replaced by a remote-controlled, identical aircraft. The aircraft would be exploded and the Cubans would be accused of having shot down the plane. Was this conspiracy also a figment of someone's imagination?

All of these supposed conspiracies did exist, but they all failed. "Northwoods" was eliminated by Kennedy, the Iran Contra deal fell apart and its key actors were exposed, and the fact that the Americans provided assistance to Afghan guerillas simply highlighted an ongoing dilemma in the often disastrous principle of American foreign policy, a policy based on the principle that my enemy's enemy is my friend.

Bröckers already made it quite clear in his first book that in his view, the grand puppet master behind September 11th was George W. Bush, who began "his rise to the position of great leader with an ideological fiction," that of "the Al Qaedaistic Bin Ladenistic global conspiracy." According to Bröckers, Bush turned the Islamists into bogeymen "with the help of a system that is essentially organized in the form of a secret society."

THE ZOMBIE TERRORISTS

The manner in which banal circumstances mutate into shadowy mysteries under such conditions is evident in an odd story that caused Mzoudi's attorney Rosenthal to engage in some speculation in court: the news that at least six of the alleged hijackers were supposedly alive and their voices were being broadcast live through various media outlets several days after the attacks.

On September 12th, a seventh man supposedly contacted his father. His name was Mohammed Atta. Atta Senior, a Cairo attorney, hasn't heard anything from his son since then, and is convinced that he has been murdered by US killers. Whether or not it includes Atta, to self-proclaimed alternative investigators the zombie terrorist theory serves as key evidence of shady machinations on the part of US authorities.

"This," say Bröckers and his co-author Andreas Hauß in what the blurb on the jacket calls a "meticulously" researched book, "has ... far-reaching consequences for the entire case, because it makes it entirely unclear as to who actually piloted the aircraft."

Just how shaky this line of argumentation is becomes evident in a statement just three lines farther down the page. "We," write the authors, "did not contact and personally interview them, nor have they been interviewed by anyone else recently." The authors continue to state that it is quite possible that the undead are now in fact dead. In the authors' opinions, if these men are alive, it must be perfectly understandable that someone who "is being accused of several thousand acts of murder" is likely to be in hiding "and unavailable for interviews."

Bröckers and Hauß spend fifteen pages making their version of a tale of suicide assassins seem plausible. Bülow does the same thing in five pages. However, a few telephone calls are all it takes to destroy their zombie theories. What these investigative journalists should have done was to spend a little time listening to those whom they cite as "reputable" sources for their arguments. Take the BBC, for example, which did in fact report, on September 23, 2001, that some of the alleged terrorists were alive and healthy and had protested their being named as assassins.

But there is one wrinkle. The BBC journalist responsible for the story only recalls this supposed sensation after having been told the date on which the story aired. "No, we did not have any videotape or photographs of the individuals in question at that time," he says, and tells us that the report was based on articles in Arab newspapers, such as the Arab News, an English-language Saudi newspaper.

The operator at the call center has the number for the Arab News on speed dial. We make a call to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. A few seconds later, Managing Editor John Bradley is on the line. When we tell Bradley our story, he snorts and says: "That's ridiculous! People here stopped talking about that a long time ago."

Bradley tells us that at the time his reporters did not speak directly with the so-called "survivors," but instead combined reports from other Arab papers. These reports, says Bradley, appeared at a time when the only public information about the attackers was a list of names that had been published by the FBI on September 14th. The FBI did not release photographs until four days after the cited reports, on September 27th.

The photographs quickly resolved the nonsense about surviving terrorists. According to Bradley, "all of this is attributable to the chaos that prevailed during the first few days following the attack. What we're dealing with are coincidentally identical names." In Saudi Arabia, says Bradley, the names of two of the allegedly surviving attackers, Said al-Ghamdi and Walid al-Shari, are "as common as John Smith in the United States

or Great Britain."

The final explanation is provided by the newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, one of the sources of Arab News, which in turn serves as a source to the BBC. Mohammed Samman is the name of the reporter who interviewed a man named Said al-Ghamdi in Tunis, only to find that al-Ghamdi was quite horrified to discover his name on the FBI list of assassins.

Samman remembers his big story well. "That was a wonderful story," he says. And that's all it was. It had nothing to do with the version made up of Bröckers' and Bülow's combined fantasies.

"The problem," says Samman, "was that after the first FBI list had been published, CNN released a photo of the pilot Said al-Ghamdi that had been obtained from the files of those Saudi pilots who had at some point received official flight training in the United States."

After Samman's story was reported by the news agencies, he was contacted by CNN. "I gave them Ghamdi's telephone number. The CNN people talked to the pilot and apologized profusely. The whole thing was quite obviously a mix-up. The Ghamdi family is one of the largest families in Saudi Arabia, and there are thousands of men named Said al-Ghamdi."

When we ask Samman to take another look at the FBI's list of photographs, he is more than happy to oblige, and tells us: "The Ghamdi on the photo is not the pilot with whom I spoke."

The investigative journalists should have been able to figure out just how obvious the solution to this puzzle was. They all write that a man named Abd al-Asis al-Umari had been named as a perpetrator by the FBI, and that there are apparently many individuals with this name. Bröckers and Hauß even noticed that the FBI had initially released an incorrect first name to the press. All of this certainly suggests that there was a mix-up, but it's also something that the conspiracy theorists apparently did not consider plausible.

In the case of the supposedly surviving terrorist Walid al-Shari, the truth is even more obvious. At least Bülow had the opportunity to avoid making this mistake. In his book, he writes that the alleged assassin Shari "lives in Casablanca and works as a pilot, according to information provided by the airline Royal Air Maroc."

If Bülow had inquired with the airline, he would have discovered that the name of the pilot who lives in Casablanca is Walid al-Shri and not, like that of the assassin, Walid al-Shari. This minor detail makes a big difference, namely the difference between a dead terrorist and a living innocent man. But to conspiracy theorists, discovering the truth is like solving a crossword puzzle for children: What's a four-letter word for a domesticated animal? Hrse.

Whatever doesn't fit is made to fit. And whatever fits is included without scrutiny. "The uncritical acceptance of any argument that suggests a conspiracy" is one of the cornerstones of all conspiracy theories, writes conservative US historian Daniel Pipes. "The conspiracy theorist starts with the conclusion and then looks for reasons to rule everything out that doesn't fit." If you happen to be holding a hammer, you're probably more likely to see nails everywhere.

Charles Ward, a former assistant of the leading Kennedy murder conspiracy theorist, Jim Garrison, described the way this method works as follows: "Garrison drew a conclusion and then organized the facts. And when the facts didn't fit, he liked to say that they'd been changed by the CIA."

This method of finding conspiracies where there are none has also been helpful to the September 11th conspiracy theorists. Otherwise, one could simply include that the reason many a controversial report never resurfaced is that it was resolved, as the story of the "living assassins" demonstrates. It is no secret, but rather an important lesson about a highly competitive news market, one in which journalists copied from one another so as not to miss a single story, and were ultimately all wrong and had all dispensed with any principles.

At this point, the story only seems to live on where Bröckers, Bülow and the like seem to prefer looking for their information: in the "global memory of the internet, which, in its archives, registers, collects and provides access to all these discarded crumbs" (Bröckers/Hauß).

And it is only there, where the old and the new, the incorrect and the correct are placed on equivalent footing, that these kinds of reports still appear to possess the currentness from which these authors fashion their suspicions and accusations.

THE DREAMERS

This indiscriminate use of facts, most of them derived from the internet, is particularly astonishing because the resumes of most conspiracy theorists are in fact quite respectable.

The spiritual leader of the self-proclaimed alternative investigators in Germany is Mathias Bröckers, former features editor at the "Tageszeitung" ("taz"), certainly a respectable publication. Bröckers, an expert on cannabis, spent many years showering the world with reports and books on the effects of the hemp plant.

Now Bröckers feels that it has become his calling to "liberate conspiracy theory from its position as a dirty, imprecise epistemology, and to ensure that it is taken seriously as a critical science of perception." His goal is to achieve a "counter-conspiracy conspiracy," whatever that is.

The second man in this group is TV writer and book author Wisnewski, who has already demonstrated his knack for turning nonsense into news in the case surrounding the (German terrorist organization) "Red Army Faction." Years ago, the journalist claimed that the third generation of the RAF was invented by the intelligence services, which urgently needed a decent enemy. Go to Wisnewski's web site and you'll find reports titled "Poison Gas Used Against Kurds was Iran-CIA operation" or "Moscow Hostage Crisis: Is the USA Behind It?" The formula is obvious: the Americans are always the murderers.

At least Andreas von Bülow, the former Federal Minister of Research and Technology and a member of the SPD (German Social Democratic Party), makes a somewhat more reputable impression. He has a respectable political career behind him, was considered one of the Social Democrats' rising young stars under former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and once served as parliamentary undersecretary in the German Ministry of Defense, where he was quite close to the world of the intelligence agencies. In 1994, he withdrew to the top floor of his house in Bonn to explain the world to the people.

The German dreamers - Bülow, Bröckers, Wisnewski - could easily have drawn their inspiration from Frenchman Thierry Meyssan. The guru of conspiracy theorists prefers to wear black, down to his Puma running shoes, drinks fruit juice on the roof terrace at the Pompidou Center in Paris, and lectures. He speaks for one hour, two hours, three hours, always returning to variations on a single sentence: "I am convinced that an aircraft did not crash into the Pentagon."

Meyssan likes to argue. Unlike the other conspiracy theorists, he didn't need September 11th as a reason to mount his soapbox. That's where he's always been. He has organized boycott campaigns against Danone, used his research to make life difficult for radical right-wing politician Le Pen, and attacked the Catholic secret order Opus Dei. He has also been a well-respected and feared man in established political circles. But does he still retain that position today?

Since last year, he has been embroiled in a court battle against France' major newspapers. He sued them because they were making fun of him. But he also sued them because he, Meyssan, believes that he must force them to live up to their responsibility to expose what really happened on September 11th.

His book has already been translated into 18 languages. In it he claims that it was certainly not a Boeing that crashed into the west wing of the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, but that it was most likely a cruise missile, evidence of the US military industry's intention to force its way into power.

Meyssan sits above the roofs of Paris and reaches across the table for his book. He points at a picture of the Pentagon façade. In the photo, the hole in the façade doesn't look very large. "And you believe that a Boeing disappeared into this hole? Yes? Is that what you believe, Monsieur?"

The book contains many photos that depict smoke, fumes and fire. Meyssan displays them like a treasure. Like evidence. Facts. Truth. But questions remain: Which photos are missing? Which ones did Meyssan overlook? And which ones did he leave out?

THE DOUBLE ATTA

The biggest conspiracy theory has been left out altogether. The authors of these books have essentially ignored the prior history of the pilots who worked with Mohammed Atta and had spent time in Hamburg. Perhaps this is because the issue has already been cleared up, leaving little room for dubious characters. Or perhaps because it's riskier to spout conspiracy theories that are based on events in your own back yard. However, the few passages they do write about the Hamburg cell are rather telling, and in fact illuminate the bungling and sloppiness of these alternative seekers of the truth.

Take the supposedly harmless perpetrators, for example. "As far as political and religious attitudes are concerned," claim Bröckers and Hauß, "all sources indicate that Atta remained inconspicuous during his time in Hamburg." All sources?

Four previous friends, including Shahid N. and Marek M., describe Mohammed Atta as the guru of a sect that spewed hateful invective. A family of teachers with whom Atta lived for some time threw him out. Why? Because the fanatical Islamist's prudishness was seriously disrupting their family life.

The authors' solution? No problem, since there were two Attas: "There are growing indications that Atta may have had a double." They remain highly imprecise, glossing over the cause of the confusion. They claim that Atta used the name Amir in Germany. His full name was Mohammed Mohammed al-Amir Awad al-Sajjid Atta. Various spellings and components of this name appear in the investigation reports. And that's about all there is.

The third example concerns a supposedly ominous computer company in the town of Wentorf near Hamburg, where some of the later attackers and their friends worked. "There are said to be anonymous indications from secret service circles suggesting that the company may have been nothing more than a letterbox company," claims Bülow.

Complete nonsense. Although the Hay Computing Company does have a letterbox, it's firmly attached to a red brick building in which flesh-and-blood employees actually perform real work. And the company has about as much to do with the secret services as this former German minister has to do with the truth: nothing.

"It is not my job to develop a provable hypothesis," says Bülow, "I can only gather the pieces of the puzzle and state that this or that element happens to be unusual."

Dark suspicions must also have been swirling around in the minds of Bröckers and Hauß when they caught wind of a German intelligence program. Even during the 1990s, Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution wire-tapped telephone conversations within the milieu of the later suicide pilots. According to the outraged investigative journalists, Bröckers and Hauß, such monitoring would have required a court order. "Could it be that a court order never existed, and that the secret services went about their business in Hamburg in complete violation of the law?" It's a question intended to generate mistrust, but all it does is reveal one thing: the complete and utter ignorance of these conspiracy experts.

That's because in contrast to a police wiretap, a court order is not required for a wiretap performed by the secret service; instead, such monitoring activities require the approval of the applicable G-10 commission. Nothing was done illegally, and nothing was kept from the supervisory boards. This raises another issue: Could it be that these authors "meticulously" investigated their way past any journalistic obligation to exercise caution and good judgement?

Any apparently inconsistent detail is used as evidence that something fishy is going on. Instead of clearing up these supposed inconsistencies by conducting their own research, the authors use the gaps in their knowledge as evidence for what they claim is manipulation by shady secret agents and police officials, peppering their writing with questions and insinuations.

For example, Wisniewski attempts to use the example of Atta's will, which was found after the attacks, to uncover inconsistencies for which he himself should be held responsible: "On the one hand, no one knows whether the will actually exists. On the other hand, no one can check the Arabic original to determine whether it was correctly translated by the FBI. In other words, we simply have no access to Atta's original will."

The only thing that is correct is that Wisniewski knows just as little about this issue as Bröckers & Co., who

drivel on about a "dubious will." They should have known better. The Arabic original of the will does exist, and those who signed it as witnesses, at Atta's request, have not disappeared.

One of them, Abdelghani Mzoudi, the alleged collaborator currently on trial in Hamburg, showed the Arabic document to Der Spiegel shortly after the attacks. Not only did Mzoudi verify the authenticity of the document, but also that of his signature.

WHERE WERE THE JEWS?

The German authors seem to find it easier to weave their conspiracy theories from a distance. Bülow, for example, writes that there was only "one Israeli victim on 9/11" in the towers of the World Trade Center, but that "a number of indications" exist "that point to some sort of connection between the Israeli Mossad and the act and perpetrators of 9/11."

It's a theory that the former minister explained, in an interview with Der Spiegel, in a remarkably convoluted manner.

Question: Let us assume that it is in fact true that only one Israeli died. Did all the others who weren't in the towers on that day know about it?

Bülow: People say that the general mood was depressed prior to the attacks. I have no idea what caused this, whether it was people warning each other through verbal propaganda.

Question: Do you mean to suggest that there were a lot of people who knew about it?

Bülow: They didn't know about it. They had an idea.

Question: And why isn't any of them talking today?

Bülow: That has happened. They say that a little Pakistani boy said: "The towers will no longer be standing tomorrow."

These are all little more than whispers in the dark. One thing is certain, however: The myth of a Jewish conspiracy began making the rounds on the internet shortly after the attacks. According to this tale, 4,000 Jews who worked in the World Trade Center didn't report to work on September 11th. This means that the Jews knew about it, since the Mossad must have planned the attack.

This theory is considered a matter of course in the Arab countries. It was first brought to life by the Lebanese TV station al-Manar, which proudly announces on its web site that it is conducting "psychological warfare against the Zionist enemy."

Abraham Foxman of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League in New York knows all too well just how tough this perfidious rumor is. He has often tried to use the figures at his disposal to dispense with the rumor. His employees counted the Jewish victims of the attack, and Foxman says that there were at least 400, and probably more. There are no official figures, since US authorities do not document religious affiliation.

While Bülow sticks to his Mossad theory, Wisnewski doubts that Islamists ever intended to attack the World Trade Center. "The same headline - 'Attack on America' - appeared everywhere after the attacks, in newspapers, magazines and on TV, and it represents a gross and presumably intentional misunderstanding of the true target of the attack."

That's because the World Trade Center in New York, Wisnewski stresses, was by no means exclusively a symbol of America. "Instead," said Wisnewski, "the impressive twin towers 'belonged' to all of mankind."

For this reason, he claims, it would be pointless to assume that "Islamist and/or Arab terrorists" would have chosen the towers as a target, since choosing "this target means that you are choosing the entire world as your enemy."

In Wisnewski's world, this hot-air analysis simply leads to the following conclusion: "Either the Islamist

assassins ... failed miserably. Or it was ... assassins who were interested in creating a worldwide war coalition under the leadership of the United States."

Wisnewski et al. seem to ignore the fact that the towers of the World Trade Center had already been the target of an Islamist attack in the past. And they do so for a very good reason, since the evidence was quite clear against those who ignited a car bomb in the twin towers' underground garage on February 26, 1993, killing six people and injuring more than a thousand.

Among the documents that investigators seized from the attackers and their backers associated with Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman was a call to arms, which reads like permanent marching orders to those who have dedicated their lives to holy war: "We must completely demoralize the enemies of God by destroying the towers that are the pillars of their civilization - their tourist attractions and the tall buildings of which they are so proud."

CRATER WITHOUT AN AIRCRAFT?

Even more glaring than such ignorance is the manner in which Wisnewski shapes and adjusts statements and facts. The fact that this practice verges on falsification is evident in the portions of his book, in which he writes about the crash of the United Airlines Boeing 757 near the town of Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Flight 93 from Newark to San Francisco took off at 8:42 a.m., carrying 37 passengers, 2 pilots, and 5 flight attendants. After terrorists had taken control of the cockpit, the jet turned from its westbound course to an eastbound course, presumably to attack the White House or the Capitol in Washington.

Some of the passengers, who had heard about the attacks in New York by telephone, attempted to overpower the terrorists, since they were convinced that their plane was also going to be used as a weapon. The Boeing 757 crashed during the ensuing struggle, and the story of flight UA 93 soon became an heroic epic.

One passenger is said to have yelled "let's roll" as he and other passengers stormed the cockpit. "Let's roll," said President Bush as he began his military campaign against terror. "Let's roll" was the slogan that soldiers wrote onto the deck of a battleship with their bodies when the US armed forces commemorated the victims of September 11th.

For Wisnewski, this apparently supports the theory that the crash near Shanksville could be a propaganda lie disseminated by the US government. The question Wisnewski uses to develop his counter-propaganda is printed in the book as a caption under a photograph of the crash site near Shanksville: "Do you believe that an entire Boeing 757 disappeared into this hole?"

He believes that metal parts at the crash site are scrap that was dumped there to perfect the deception: "Since there was no aircraft there, the scrap metal could not have come from a plane crash."

One of the witnesses for this claim is - in the book as well as in Wisnewski's film for German television network WDR titled "Aktzeichen 11.9. ungelöst" ("File number 9/11 unsolved") - the mayor of the town of Shanksville, Ernie Stull. Wisnewski and the film's co-author, Willy Brunner, visited the 78-year-old mayor this past March. They had the man relate his experience of September 11th on camera.

In the book, Wisnewski describes the scene as follows: "And then it becomes apparent that something is troubling Ernie Stull. On the one hand, it's what the leading authorities of the United States - the FBI, the CIA, the President - have claimed. On the other hand, it's what his brother-in-law and his friend told him. 'There was no airplane,' says Ernie Stull, speaking partly to us and partly as if he were listening to his own voice, checking to see if he had heard himself correctly. One and half years after the catastrophe, he still shakes his head, completely at a loss, and helplessly extends his arms: 'No airplane'."

When Der Spiegel confronts Stull with the English translation of these passages in the book and the film script, the man is speechless: "My statements were taken completely out of context. Of course there was an airplane. It's just that there wasn't much left of it after the explosion. That's what I meant when I said 'no airplane'. I saw parts of the wreckage with my own eyes, even one of the engines. It was lying in the bushes."

Wisniewski disputes accusations that he manipulated Stull and mentions a statement Stull made in the WDR film, in which his description was correctly reproduced: "The airplane was completely destroyed. Bang! It crashed into the ground and disintegrated - completely."

Although this is correct, it amounts to hair-splitting, since Wisniewski and Brunner also suggest in the film that there was no aircraft. Quote: "A Boeing 757 and all of its passengers in that hole? The layperson is astonished, while the experts remain silent. Or could there be another, far more terrible truth to the matter?"

The authors use two photographs to insinuate just what this truth might be. One is a snapshot taken in Shanksville on September 11th. It depicts a mushroom cloud over the crash site. The other photo depicts a mushroom cloud that appeared after a bomb was dropped in Afghanistan. Quote from the film script: "...exactly the same mushroom-shaped column of smoke in Shanksville. Wasn't it really a bomb or a missile?"

The audacity with which ARD journalist Wisniewski assembled his own truths is evident in a translated segment of the interview provided by WDR at Der Spiegel's request. According to the WDR copy, the portion of the film script quoted above is followed by this statement made by Stull on the original tape:

"They just found the two turbines because, of course, they're heavier and more massive than everything else. But there was almost nothing left of the actual airplane. You can still find plate-sized parts out there. And Neville from the farm over there found an aluminum part from the airplane's outside shell behind his barn that must've been about 8 by 10 or even 8 by 12 feet."

No airplane?

Given this statement, it remains a mystery as to how WDR executives can continue to claim that Stull's "statements were not misquoted or distorted in the film." It is also quite telling that "Neville from the farm" does not appear in the film, nor does anyone else who could possibly refute the authors' claims.

"Mr. Stull did not tell us anything about witnesses who had seen the plane," Wisniewski told Der Spiegel. That's certainly possible, but they do exist, and they're not difficult to find.

One of them is Lee Purbaugh, a laborer from Shanksville. The moment that seemed "like an eternity" to him has remained deeply embedded in his memory. He says that an "unbelievably loud roar" caused him to look up at the sky, where the giant airplane suddenly seemed suspended "practically over my head." Seconds later, at 10:06 a.m., the Boeing plunged into the ground.

Another witness is named Eric Peterson. He was standing in his store when he heard the noise of the plane's engines. He stepped outside and watched the United Airlines jet until it disappeared behind a nearby hill. Then a fireball erupted. Peterson immediately jumped into his SUV and drove to the site of the crash.

When he arrived, he saw aircraft debris spread across a large area surrounding the impact crater, which he said was "still burning." According to Peterson, "bits of clothing were hanging" in the branches of the surrounding trees.

There was so much evidence of a plane crash lying around that FBI employees and crash investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) spent thirteen days recovering the wreckage. The heaviest piece of wreckage that was found, part of an engine, weighed almost a ton. This was certainly much heavier than the supposedly "indefinable 'scrap' found at the 'crash site' of flight UA 93," about which Wisniewski speculates.

Moreover, there was nothing particularly mysterious about the subsequent handling of the wreckage. For the duration of the investigation, the remains of the jet were placed under an FBI guard. Once the investigators had completed their search for evidence, the standard procedure following a plane crash was followed. The parts were returned to the owner of the aircraft. In the case of the United Airlines Boeing, the owner was the airline's insurance company, the United States Aircraft Insurance Group (USAIG), which is headquartered in New York. USAIG still owns the physical reminders of this murderous event. In spite of this body of evidence, WDR's television director, Ulrich Deppendorf, is "simply unable to imagine that the

facts are incorrect" as far as the film is concerned. But Deppendorf should have known better.

That's because WDR author Wisnewski had always found the truth to be a rather complex affair - a thought pattern common to all conspiracy theorists, says US historian Pipes: "Beginning with the assumption that appearances are deceiving, they reject common knowledge and search for exotic and relatively unknown possibilities. A predilection for the improbable ... gives their data its typical and unmistakable quality."

The truth that Wisnewski and his colleagues on the program "Monitor," Wolfgang Landgraeber and Ekkehard Sieker, lobbed at the market for conspiracy literature in 1992 was also hidden and entangled, surprising and mysterious, monstrous and cunning. It's a market whose most important rule appears to be a variation on Murphy's Law: Anything that can be imagined must have happened.

The trio wrote a 400-page book titled "The RAF Phantom," in which they propagated the theory that the "Red Army Faction" had ceased to exist in 1982. They claimed that there had never been a third generation of the RAF, that the murders of the company spokesman of Deutsche Bank, Alfred Herrhausen, and of the German Trust Agency director, Detlev Karsten Rohwedder had not been the work of the RAF.

Instead, Wisnewski's usual suspects were the intelligence services - the CIA, the BND (the German Federal Intelligence Service), the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, and the criminals at the BKA (German Federal Office of Criminal Investigation) -, a giant network of conspiracy, but also one that, amazingly so, was so small that no one happened to notice it until the "Monitor" men did their own investigating.

Unfortunately for these sleuths, the truth began to diverge from their script. Shortly before their book was published in 1992, the RAF, which they claimed had ceased to exist in 1982, issued long-winded statements from the underground explaining why it intended to give up its policy of armed resistance.

In a 1997 interview with Der Spiegel, Birgit Hogefeld, sentenced to life in prison in 1998 for multiple counts of murder and attempted murder, issued a statement that completely burst these journalists' bubbles: "In the radical leftist circles with which I am familiar, this nonsense was never important. Of course, the fact that anyone took this seriously had something to do with the fact that the RAF was very isolated by the legitimate leftists during the 1980s."

CRUISE MISSILES IN THE PENTAGON?

What is certain is that Wisnewski and Brunner intensify their conspiratorial claims even further in the second part of the WDR documentary on September 11th.

Just as in the case of Shanksville, they also claim that a "bomb or missile" could have been involved in the attack on the Pentagon. Once again, everything seems to fit: the hole was too small for an aircraft, and the wreckage was virtually unidentifiable. And once again, their message is formulated in the form of a question: Fairy tales at the Pentagon?

All of this is complete nonsense. According to calculations performed by NTSB experts, the Boeing 757 weighed approximately 82 tons, with the plane's fuel making up 16 tons of its weight. The mass of aluminum, kerosene, cabin furnishings, baggage and passengers crashed into the US Department of Defense at a speed of about 530 mph. At that speed, says Mete Sozen, a specialist in reinforced concrete construction at Purdue University in Indiana, the body of the aircraft would have provided about as much resistance "as a sausage casing."

The Boeing disintegrated completely after the impact. As if the tail of the plane had opened on impact and forced its innermost parts outward, body parts of the terrorists, who were presumably in the cockpit, were found near the façade of the outer ring of the Pentagon. In contrast, remains of the passengers were still found deep in the interior of the building.

Scientists estimate that about 2.2 tons of fuel exploded in a fireball outside the building at the time of impact. The remaining 14 tons of fuel, together with the combined wreckage, shot into the building. For fractions of a second before the fuel exploded, the mixture of aircraft parts and fuel produced a high-speed "avalanche of sludge." Temperatures in excess of 1600 degrees Fahrenheit removed any remaining strength from the steel beams, which had been already been stripped of concrete. Twenty minutes after

the crash, the damaged section of the building collapsed over the impact crater.

The only witness who supports the WDR journalists' Pentagon scenario is a man who, in the film, is simply introduced as John Judge.

What viewers are not told is that Judge is a sort of fixture on the American conspiracy theory scene. In the relevant circles, he is considered an expert in "collective and individual thought control." He links the mass suicide of the Peoples Temple cult in Guyana to the assassination of Martin Luther King, and he believes that both events were the work of shadowy CIA and military intelligence agents. Naturally, he's also interested in the Kennedy assassination, and claims to have discovered connections that point to those who were responsible for the murder of Black Muslim leader Malcolm X.

Coincidentally, this witness to an alleged bombing also happens to know the Pentagon from his days "as a young child." He remembers quite clearly the day when, at ten years of age, he and his parents, who were civilian employees at the Pentagon, were eating a meal in the building's courtyard. He says: "I sat down on a silver box, and my father told me to get down because I was sitting on a missile launcher."

Wisniewski and Brunner are pleased to summarize that, in Judge's opinion, the claim that "it was impossible to detect and ward off this danger quickly enough is completely implausible."

The same claim is made by the man on whose work Wisniewski bases his "Pentagate" theory in the book: Thierry Meyssan. One of the circumstances Meyssan uses to justify his theory that some people could have known something about the attacks in advance is the fact that the internet address "www.wtc2001.com" had already been registered before September 11th.

That's true. However, it had absolutely nothing to do with the World Trade Center. The acronym "wtc" stood for "World Track Championships," which are the world championships in bicycle track racing. A click of a mouse would have quickly burst this bubble.

Another example is the use of statements made by TV journalist Mike Walter, who witnessed the attack on the US Department of Defense as he was driving to work. Meyssan used Walter's statement to support his theory that the Pentagon was destroyed with missiles or remotely guided aircraft.

Walter is still furious about this manipulation. He saw the aircraft fly toward the building and accelerate in a "soft curve." Then, says Walter, "it went into a dive and hit a light pole. Shortly after that, it slammed into the Pentagon. The wings collapsed, I heard the explosion, and then I saw the fireball. The guy who was flying it knew what he was doing. It behaved like a cruise missile."

That's what Walter said. But Meyssan only quoted the last sentence.

The fact that there were many witnesses who saw the American Airlines jet crash into the Defense Department presented a problem for Wisniewski, and this is how he solved it: "One cannot truly believe these witnesses. Perhaps some of them were lying for some reason, but others could actually have seen something that reminded them of a passenger jet."

He fails to mention Penny Elgas, a witness to the crash. She said that as she watched from her car, "the tail of the plane slid into the Pentagon, as if a big door had been opened there."

It was only hours later, once she had returned home and the shock of the event had subsided, that she discovered that a piece of the plane's wreckage had flown through the sunroof and into her car - a place where there is little room for smoky theories.

DOMINIK CZIESCHE, JÜRGEN DAHLKAMP, ULRICH FICHTNER, ULRICH JAEGER, GUNTHER LATSCH, GISELA LESKE, MAX F. RUPPERT

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