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CHACR COMMENTARY // MARCH 22, 2022

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A TYPHOON IN A TEACUP... OR HAS GERMANY WOKEN UP?

IT HAS been called a paradigm shift, or, to use the German word, a *Zeitenwende*. On 27 February 2022, the German chancellor Scholz announced a massive investment into the German armed forces as a consequence of the events in the Ukraine. A one-off €100 billion investment will be augmented by a drastic increase of the annual defence budget, which will sit at or above the magical 2% of GDP. This will make Germany the biggest spender on defence in Europe with the equivalent of roughly £63 billion (for comparison, the UK is spending approximately £45 billion) and the third-largest in the world. For Germany, this is a drastic shift, in particular when

we consider that the German government only very recently hailed the delivery of 5,000 helmets to the Ukraine as an important step to protecting security in Europe.

The money being made available will go a long way in ensuring that the armed forces will be brought up to full establishment and play an important role in national and NATO defence plans. This is very much needed. Decades of under-funding and unfinished reforms have left the Bundeswehr in a dire state. There is a general lack of equipment, and the return to territorial defence means that some of the decisions that had been taken in light of deployments such as Afghanistan will have to be

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revoked. The best example is perhaps the Army's Air defence capability. The Army Air defence units were disbanded in 2012, and the skies over the German soldiers are currently pretty much undefended. Already in 2016, the German MoD announced that it would require €130 billion between 2016 and 2030 to modernise the armed forces and bring in new equipment, which, perhaps, puts the announced cash injection into a clearer context. In a recent LinkedIn post the Inspekteur des Heeres (roughly equivalent to CGS) described the Army as 'naked'. This 'nakedness' can be seen in all services, and the shopping list is long. To name just a few examples: after a long debate, the German MoD announced that the Air Force will

buy US F-35 aircraft to substitute the ageing Tornado fleet. This is a radical shift, considering that German procurement has so far favoured German and European equipment solutions. The Army has got plans to drastically increase its artillery, from the currently existing four battalions to three regiments and an additional battalion. It has been estimated that acquiring enough ammunition for all weapons systems alone might cost in the region of 20 billion Euros.

One German defence company has already announced that it can offer the government equipment, including helicopters, tanks and armoured personnel carriers, for up to 42 billion Euros at short notice.¹ The time frames presented for delivery of these items range from 18 months for wheeled vehicles to 24 months for tracked vehicles. This might not look overly fast in the light of the rapidly evolving situation in Eastern Europe, but this is nearly lightning speed when the realities of the German procurement system are taken into consideration. The slowness of this system was identified years ago and several defence ministers had promised to streamline the processes and to ensure that the required materiel reaches the



Picture: Olaf Kosinsky / kosinsky.eu

In the hot seat: Germany's Federal Minister of Defence, Christine Lambrecht



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“DEFENCE IS AN UNPOPULAR TOPIC IN GERMANY AND IT CERTAINLY DOES NOT WIN ANY VOTES. THE LONG SHADOW OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR HANGS TOO DEEP OVER THE GERMAN MINDS TO BE IGNORED.”

soldiers quickly. The German bureaucratic system is thorough, but slow. It takes political will to change this. Despite the repeated vows by the defence ministers, it seems that not much has been achieved. This is a failure, not least of the political class and the political leadership in the defence ministry.

And this is the real problem. The post of defence minister is not often considered as a first choice by politicians, and this is reflected in the list of recent defence ministers. They seem to have been lifted into the seat for many possible reasons, but surely not because of their expertise (or interest, for that matter) in defence. Recent articles in the German press suggest a growing frustration of the military with the political leadership. In one article, it was claimed that the current defence minister, Christine Lambrecht, has antagonised the senior military leadership by pretty much refusing to engage with

them.² The previous defence minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, has recently expressed her disappointment that not more had been achieved generally during her tenure. Her predecessor, Ursula von der Leyen, is remembered in the Bundeswehr predominately for carrying out a witch-hunt and trying to root out alleged right-wing cells in the Bundeswehr. As a consequence, what had remained of military traditions from before 1945 has now been all but eradicated in the Bundeswehr. In this process, von der Leyen also attested that the Bundeswehr on the whole had an ‘attitude problem’, which really did not contribute to creating a close bond between the military and its civilian leadership.³

Up until now, these developments were hardly noticed by the wider public. Defence is an unpopular topic in Germany and it certainly does not win any votes. History still plays the central role in Germany’s understanding when

it comes to all matters of defence and strategy – or rather, the lack of strategic thinking. The long shadow of the Second World War hangs too deep over the German minds to be ignored.⁴ It has been inconceivable to many Germans that the German military might be deployed, least of all in territories that had suffered under the Nazi yoke. This might have been a good reason in the past, but now it is an argument that is being accepted in Germany alone and nowhere else in the world. It is an irony that the enemies of the Second World War are now pointing out to Germany that it cannot hide behind its history any more. And yet, the then German foreign minister Joschka Fischer used German history as a core argument to convince his own generally anti-military Green Party to support the deployment of German troops into Kosovo in 1999: ‘Never again war, never again Auschwitz, never again genocide, never again fascism. All this belongs together,’ he stated before pointing out that

¹www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/industrie/staerkung-der-bundeswehr-ruestungsindustrie-bereitet-hoehere-produktion-vor-rheinmetall-bietet-milliardenpaket-an/28113540.html [accessed 15/03/2022]. The question of timely delivery of materiel is one that has haunted military thinkers for a long time. For detailed studies of (rapid) expansion of armed forces in history, see Matthias Strohn, ed., *How Armies Grow. The Expansion of Military Forces in the Age of Total War 1789-1945*, Oxford 2019.

²www.pressreader.com/germany/nordwest-zeitung/20220226/281603833915094 [accessed 21/03/2022].

³www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2017-04/ursula-von-der-leyen-bundeswehr-kritik-haltungsproblem-soldat-terrorverdacht [accessed 16/03/2022].

⁴On the importance of the Second World War legacies in the 21st century, see Matthias Strohn, ed., *The Long Shadow of World War Two. The Legacy of the War and its Impact on Political and Military Thinking Since 1945*, Oxford 2021.

if morally driven policies were fundamental for inner-German discussion, they were also fundamental for foreign policy and the will and determination to stop genocide in Kosovo.

The majority of Germans feel anxious when thinking about the armed forces and war. This has been highlighted many times, including by more than one federal president. As the current president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier [pictured inset], stated in a speech on 14 November 2021: “Many Germans feel uneasy about military rituals. They do not want to be reminded of what employing an army, including the Bundeswehr, means. Death and trauma, German soldiers in armed missions, in foreign countries – these are things we prefer to repress. We talk about these things far too seldom and only reluctantly.”⁵

While this might be understandable when taking German history into consideration, it also means that wide parts of society have closed their eyes to the realities of international politics and conflict. Strategic thinking

and a sense of Realpolitik often seem to be alien to the floors of German ministries.⁶ You only have to read Michael Howard’s book *The invention of Peace* to understand that peace is the exception, not the rule, but this view has not been a prominent one in Germany.⁷ The German Armed Forces Centre for Military History and Social Sciences conducts an annual survey on the population’s view in the areas of security and defence. The results of the 2019 survey



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conveyed the somewhat naive view of German mainstream society.⁸ According to the survey, the majority of people supported an active foreign and security policy, but this engagement should be restricted to peaceful and diplomatic means. The ambivalence between policy goals and the means to achieve these is clearly visible in the study. Military operations were only supported by the majority as long as they were restricted to training and stabilisation

operations. According to the study, the population did not reject the military as a tool of foreign policy, but was not in favour of the use of force. It remains unclear whether the authors of the study saw the irony in this statement, but it is a clear description of the underdeveloped state of debate on foreign and security issues in Germany.

This is, in particular, a problem amongst the younger

generations, those that have never experienced anything other than freedom and unthreatened peace in Europe. As the defence analyst Ulrike Franke put it, “I believe that German millennials have a hard time adjusting to the world we are living in now. We struggle to think in terms of interest, we struggle with the concept of geopolitical power, and we struggle with military power being an element of geopolitical power.”⁹ It is fair to say that this attitude has been taken to the extreme by certain groups. One example is the refusal of one Berlin district in 2020 to accept the support the Bundeswehr in the struggle against Covid, because the political decision-makers felt too uneasy about the idea of seeing uniforms. Only recently, wide parts of society complained about the German Army holding a tattoo in front of the Reichstag, because the torches reminded people of the Nazi period. And this is a ‘Parlamentsarmee’, a ‘military of parliament’, as the Germans call it to show the close ties with German government and thus with the people.

From a military perspective, recent deployments could only partially make up the feeling of a loss of purpose that had taken a grip of the armed forces after the end of the Cold War. The operations, such as Afghanistan and Mali, might have been the new reality, but they also stood in contrast to hundreds of years of German military history and military thought, which had always concentrated on a major, land-based war in Europe. In order to prepare for these new deployments, the Bundeswehr underwent several reforms and rounds of re-structuring; the most obvious and drastic symbol of

⁵www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2021/11/211114-Gedenkrede-Volkstrauertag.html [accessed 18/03/2022].

⁶In the context of this paper, this boils down to the question of strategic ‘winning’ and what this actually means. For detailed historical and nation-specific studies on this, see Matthias Strohn, ed., *Winning Wars. The Enduring Nature and Changing Character of Victory From Antiquity to the 21st Century*, Oxford 2020.

⁷Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace. Reflections on War and International Order*, New Haven and London 2000.

⁸Markus Steinbrecher et al., ‘Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Ergebnisse und Analysen der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2019’, <https://augengeradeaus.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/20191217-Bericht-Bevoelkerungsumfrage-zuMSBw-2019.pdf> [accessed 10/03/2022].

⁹www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/sirius-2021-3007/html?lang=de [accessed 19/03/2022].



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these was the end of conscription, which was announced in 2011. There were logical explanations for this: conscription had become a farce, with the majority of young men opting for the social services instead of serving in the forces. At the end, a conscript only had to serve for six months, hardly enough to train a soldier, and constitutional restrictions meant that they could not be deployed to places such as Afghanistan. At the same time, they tied up a great deal of resources, because they had to be clothed, fed, and trained by the professional soldiers, who were thus not available for operations. And yet, conscription ensured that the wider society stayed somewhat connected to the armed forces. It also meant that Germany had large numbers of reservists and a comprehensive network of reservist units and formations, some of which the Army is now trying to replicate again. In the light of perceived fundamental changes to international politics after the end of the Cold War, the baby was thrown out with the bath water.

Perhaps the most dangerous consequence of these developments was a politicisation of the armed forces. The Bundeswehr had, in many

respects, been a political project when it was founded in 1955, both to integrate the population with the new state, and also to give this state a certain gravitas in the international arena. The realities of the Cold War ensured that one could not afford to lose sight of military efficiency. This changed with the end of the Cold War and the state of limbo the armed forces found themselves in. Even the chairwoman of the parliamentary defence committee, Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, recently complained that she found it unacceptable that the generals in the Ministry of Defence concentrated more on repeating party lines rather than giving clear military advice. As Strack-Zimmermann stated, “I wish we would get more clarity from the generals and less gibberish”.¹⁰ An underling theme here is the fact that the Bundeswehr was founded with the clear intention of breaking with Germany’s military past, in which, allegedly, men (and there were no women in uniform at that time) were merely executing orders without thinking. The new concept of the Staatsbürger in Uniform (literally: citizen in uniform) was supposed to ensure that the military were fully integrated into civilian society and that they would fight

not because they had been ordered to, but because they wanted to defend the (democratic) state. The most obvious break with German military tradition was that military personnel were now allowed to vote. This had not been the case before 1945, because, as the argument ran, the military should serve the state and its people, not political parties.

One consequence of this approach has been that the Bundeswehr has been more open to changes in society than other militaries and has tried to reflect society rather than to create a ‘band of brothers’ with a warrior spirit. The discussions around the concept of Staatsbürger in Uniform were heated when it was introduced in the 1950. Traditionalists, who wanted to concentrate exclusively on the aspects of military effectiveness, stood opposed to what they considered ‘weak’ ideas, such as the integration of the Bundeswehr into wider society (although the proponents of the citizen in uniform have always argued that this concept would actually enhance military effectiveness). This concept has never been tested in a major war, and it might well be that this approach would prove superior to other philosophies. However,

it seems at times that the lack of military threat after the end of the Cold War has shifted the parameters, and that the previously so-called ‘weak’ aspects have often taken centre stage.

To reiterate, and make no mistake, Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has brought about a major and seismic shift in the policy of the government of the day in Germany. This is a shift that has been, and will continue to be, welcomed by those who understand or serve in Defence. For now, with all eyes on the war in eastern Europe, this policy shift will be likely to find broad support in Germany, even among those with no real understanding or buy-in to the underlying implications of this change. But the change of a national approach, from one of instinctive pacifism to one of comfort in being the world’s third largest spender on Defence, is profound indeed, and holds far-reaching implications in all sorts of ways – and it may take some time and effort to find real roots if that new policy is to become the ‘new normal’ for Germany. An increased defence budget alone will not fix this. It can buy tanks and planes, but it cannot buy a new mindset.

¹⁰www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus236275350/Strack-Zimmermann-FDP-will-weniger-Geschwurbel-in-der-Bundeswehr.html [accessed 19/03/2022].