Torture practices in the German army

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A few weeks ago, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* revealed that German army (Bundeswehr) recruits in a barracks in Coesfeld, Westphalia, were repeatedly tortured during their basic training between June and September. As part of the re-enactment of a hostage situation, they were bound and brought to a cellar for "interrogation." They were then drenched with water, struck on their necks, and maltreated with electrical shocks.

The Defence Ministry immediately attempted to downplay the incident and dismiss it as an "unacceptable and isolated incident." German Defence Minister Peter Struck (SPD—German Social Democratic Party) and the chairman of the German parliament (Bundestag) Defence Committee, Reinhold Robbe (SPD), announced strict consequences and attempted to distance themselves from those responsible. Even though similar cases have turned up in other barracks—there are presently at least 14 abuse cases with supporting evidence—the defence minister stuck to his thesis of an isolated incident.

The investigation ordered by the Defence Ministry will not deal with the issue of why such situations were being practiced as part of basic army training for soldiers who are to be deployed to foreign countries for combat. In an interview with the magazine *Report Mainz*, one of the accused from Coesfeld even indicated that in the future, exercises in mock hostage-taking incidents were to be part of basic training. He said that his superiors had instructed him along corresponding guidelines.

The media thoroughly reported the case, although they did so exclusively from the standpoint of recruit abuse. They did not raise the much more important issue that soldiers who practice the use, as well as endurance, of torture will not flinch from using torture when they find themselves in a stress situation. The widespread use of torture on the part of American troops in Iraq bears witness to this fact.

It is clear that these incidents have a direct connection with the Bundeswehr's transformation from a defensive force into a combat army. It is not possible to carry out this change without altering the nature of the army. The restriction of the Bundeswehr to territorial defence, as well as its morality and own image, were a result of special historical conditions that prevailed during the postwar period.

When Germany rearmed just a few years after the end of the Second World War, the crimes of the German army during Nazi rule were still vivid in the memories of many people, and the plans for rearmament encountered sharp protest. The victorious Western powers nonetheless supported this plan, in order to utilise Germany as a Cold War outpost and hinder the Soviet Union's sphere of influence.

Under these conditions, the founding of the Bundeswehr could only succeed under the cloak of democracy and on the basis of a symbolic break with the Nazi Wehrmacht. Its scope was explicitly limited to territorial defence and the concept of "internal leadership" was developed.

The basis of this concept was to dampen the conflict between the authoritarian and hierarchical structure of the army and the basic human and civil rights of the soldiers by making soldiers critically thinking "citizens in uniform." In this manner, the Bundeswehr could be integrated into the democratic limits of the constitution, thereby preventing the emergence of an elite military esprit de corps and the development of a state within a state—as had occurred in the Weimar Republic.

In practice, there was a substantial gap between official claims and reality. Ruling circles, however, at least accepted this general concept during the entire postwar period. The "citizen in uniform" was the much-lauded figurehead of an army based on general subscription and anchored in society.

With the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany, the international position of Germany changed fundamentally. Territorial defence became obsolete overnight, and a gigantic power vacuum simultaneously arose to Germany's east.

Initially, the phraseology of the army as a democratic peacekeeping force was retained, but at the same time a growing proportion of the ruling elite recognised the opportunity to shake off the restrictions of the postwar period and to rebuild Germany into an influential great power. They want Germany to be able to impose its interests not only through economic and political means, but through military means as well.

Already in 1992, the conservative government led by Helmut Kohl began redefining the Bundeswehr's role. In the centre stood the furtherance of the "legitimate national interests" of Germany, especially the "unhindered access to markets and resources throughout the world" (Defence Policy Guidelines 1992).

The German Constitutional Court supported this new orientation with a judgement that permitted a very broad conception of defence. Since 1994, Bundeswehr soldiers have increasingly been deployed outside of NATO territory. Initially, they were restricted to medical and logistical tasks, but soon afterwards became active in armed, so-called peacekeeping missions.

After the Kohl government was replaced by a coalition of the SPD and Greens in 1998, this course accelerated. The SPD-Green government deployed German soldiers for combat in a foreign country for the first time since the Second World War. The Greens simultaneously began a debate on the cancelling of obligatory military service in favour of a powerful intervention army

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equipped with modern weapons systems.

After the initial ice had been broken, numerous further deployments occurred outside of NATO territory. After a short time, Germany had more soldiers deployed outside of its own territory than any other country, apart from the US. The German government also used the September 11 attacks as a justification to step up militarisation and to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy.

This course was codified in a new edition of the Defence Policy Guidelines published in 2000. The guidelines expanded the Bundeswehr's potential region of deployment to the entire globe, and also adopted the US military doctrine of intimidation and preventive war as the criteria for German defence policies.

For the Bundeswehr to carry out its new role, it increasingly needs a new type of soldier. Political education and independent thought do not mix with aggressive military policies. As Bundeswehr deployments become more violent, the character of the soldiers must change to correspond to new requirements and the army made independent of the population as a whole.

In his capacity as army inspector, Hans-Otto Budde bluntly expressed this point as follows: "We need archaic fighters, as well as those who can lead a high-tech war."

Psychology professor Morus Markard also explained how this could be accomplished in an interview with the TV program "Monitor": "During the soldiers' education, the Bundeswehr must eliminate the moral inhibitions that are widespread within our society against killing other people, against humiliating them, and against measures that either resemble torture or that are torture.... [The Bundeswehr] must ensure that these inhibitions are done away with in principle and in such a manner that foreign deployments involving the killing, humiliation and, under certain conditions, the torture of other people becomes possible."

A statement from the Hamburg Institute for Peace and Security Policies, made a few months before the abuse case in Coesfeld arose, indicates that such a development within the Bundeswehr has been in the pipeline for years. Since the 1980s, the political and military leadership have used the motto "fighting motivation" in conscious distinction to "social value pluralism" to further a traditional military image within broad sections of the Bundeswehr.

"The preliminary culmination of these reforms occurred in the 'neo-traditional' establishment of a 'warrior cult,' that defines the capabilities of the Bundeswehr as the measure of all things. The soldier as a war-like, ever-ready, selfless serving and unconditionally obedient warrior has unquestionably become the accepted norm" (Commission "European Security and Future of the Bundeswehr," "Democracy does not stop at the Barracks Door," Hamburg, 2004).

The concept of "citizens in uniform," as well as the claim of the Bundeswehr to be anchored in society, has been sacrificed to militarism, along with the postwar limitation of the Bundeswehr to defence-only purposes. Though criticism and condemnation have predominated in the debate over the abuse at Coesfeld, some voices have attempted to justify these developments and to use the controversy as an opportunity to gain acceptance for the new image of the soldier among the population.

Munich According to Klaus Naumann, *Merkur*, the general inspector of the Bundeswehr, criticised the fact that the defence minister had not been immediately notified of the incidents. He rejected the notion, however, that military training in Germany is too hard: "The Bundeswehr has encountered an entirely new reality with the deployment of troops to foreign lands, involving a much closer confrontation with the extreme aspects of a soldier's life. We must react accordingly."

Author Jürgen Busche went considerably further in a recent contribution to the *Süddeutschen Zeitung*. Busche is known among other things for having authored the book *Heldenprüfung* (Testing of Heroes), which attempts to acquaint readers with the "great military feats" of six soldiers and officers from the First World War (among them Erwin Rommel), and thereby make possible an "uninhibited relationship" between the army and population at large.

He introduces the idea of a "carefully cultivated military tradition" as a foundation for education in the Bundeswehr, in order to give the soldiers orientation through military "role models." In doing so, he has no qualms about condemning "historical-critical discussions about the German military" in which "the Germans above all appear as fools or rogues," which he regards as a hindrance to the education of the armed forces.

To put it more directly, this means that an uncritical glorification of German militarism and its "heroes" should be made the foundation for education in the Bundeswehr. Its criminal role in two world wars should simply be passed over, in order to make possible an "uninhibited relationship" on the part of soldiers to their job of killing and dying to further the interests of German imperialism.

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