

German army and air force deployed against G8 summit demonstrators

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Although the German constitution strictly forbids the intervention of the army for domestic purposes, German army units and an air force squadron were used to spy on demonstrators in the course of the G8 summit of world leaders held in Germany in the middle of June. Tornado fighter aircraft were switched from their current mission in Afghanistan to fly over and photograph the camps set up by demonstrators on the fringes of the G8 summit held in the German resort of Heiligendamm.

Following a brief flurry of criticism for the deployment, it now seems likely that the German government has nothing to fear in the way of repercussions, and attempts are underway to bury the issue in official committees. Neither the media nor official political bodies are showing any interest. Only the interior committee of the state parliament of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has announced it will look into the issue of co-operation between police and military, which it describes as merely of a technical and logistical nature. Although the affair took place less than two months ago, the press has largely dropped it.

The ban on the use of the army inside German territory is, in common with many other clauses of the post-war German constitution, bound up with the bitter historical experiences suffered under the Nazi regime, the Weimar Republic and the German Empire (which employed the slogan, “Soldiers are the only way to stop Democrats”).

In accordance with article 35 of the Basic Law, the German army can be called upon to intervene domestically only in the case of major accidents or natural catastrophes. In a judgment last year in connection with air security, the Constitutional Court confirmed that in the event of a domestic intervention, the German army could not employ specific military

measures—i.e. it was restricted to the same measures that are normally the reserve of the police.

Since assuming office, German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) has sought to systematically overcome the legal restrictions on the use of the German army and has repeatedly evoked the danger of terrorist attacks to argue for an amendment to the constitution. Up until now, the second main partner in the German grand coalition government, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), has refused to countenance such an amendment.

Now the SPD has been confronted with a fait accompli with regard to the German army intervention at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, but the party’s leadership has put up no serious opposition. Representatives of both SPD and CDU in the governing coalition have either sought to justify, or play down, the deployment of the army against demonstrators.

The SPD’s domestic affairs speaker, Dieter Wiefelspuetz, merely described the deployment of the German army as “lacking in discretion,” while the SPD defence speaker, Rainer Arnold, described the use of German air force personnel and machines as a “doubtful mission”.

CDU domestic affairs speaker, Wolfgang Bosbach, declared that the aerial sweep of the camp set up by G8 protesters was legitimate as a measure to prevent severe criminal offences, while the CDU expert on military issues, Bernd Siebert, proclaimed, “The deployment was clearly covered by the constitution”. The German chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) has lined up behind her Interior Minister and made clear that she had long been in favour of “the army taking over more duties internally”.

A hearing organized in Berlin by the Republican Lawyer Association (RAV) made clear the extent of the

intervention carried out by the German army in Heiligendamm.

Evidence at the hearing included film taken by a G8 protester in the nearby city of Rostock on June 6. The protester, a former German soldier, had personally observed the direct coordination between members of an army unit and the police and was able to identify the unit on the basis of vehicle identification plates. The vehicles involved were part of a tank reconnaissance unit, whose military tasks consist of “identifying and destroying the enemy”. Tanks equipped with cameras and night-vision devices had been located at motorway bridges and fields close to where protesters held demonstrations.

A number of helicopters bearing the words “Army” and “Air Force” were also used to guide police units accompanying the demonstrators. These reports have been indirectly confirmed by spokesmen for the German army.

Another witness described the activities of a military defence service unit, which spied on a local community organization, and the deployment of Tornado combat aircraft, which flew with a terrifying noise an estimated 70 meters over the camps of the G8 protesters.

The planes involved belong to the German air force squadron 51 “Max Immelmann” and were active between 1995 to 2001 in the course of the Balkans War. Part of NATO’s rapid strike force, the “Immelmann” squadron operates world-wide and has recently flown missions in Sudan and Afghanistan.

The use of Tornado reconnaissance planes for the surveillance and intimidation of anti-G8 demonstrators has been made the subject of an enquiry by the defence committee of the German parliament, which meets behind closed doors. The parliament defence committee has the task of agreeing on the national defence budget and exercises a certain parliamentary control function in relation to the army.

According to press reports, the defence committee had agreed to the use of 1,100 soldiers for the G8 summit but had not given the go-ahead for the use of Tornado aircraft. Instead approval for two Tornado flights is said to have been personally given by Defence Secretary Franz Josef Jung. In fact, the squadron carried out a total of seven flights, not two. While admitting a discrepancy of five flights, the Defence Minister went on to justify the entire action, declaring

that the missions conformed to the German constitution.

According to the online version of the magazine *Der Spiegel*, the total cost of the air force intervention during the G8 summit amounted to approximately 10 million euros.

While constitutional experts declare that the Defence Minister is operating in a “legal grey zone”, the fact is that the recent decision by the Constitutional Court regarding air security again confirmed that military means cannot be employed against the domestic population. It is clear that the open and provocative use of German units and the air force in Heiligendamm, together with a propaganda campaign warning of the danger of terrorism and terror attacks, was aimed at setting a precedent whereby the German population is forced to accustom itself to the use of the military on German streets.

The government has since issued demonstrators an “apology” for the irregular, low-altitude flights, but cynically maintained that the main problem was the noise arising from the flights. Parliamentary undersecretary Christian Schmidt (CSU) granted in the Bundestag that a Tornado flight “incontestably represents a not insignificant disturbance,” but at the same time denied that the flights represented any violation of the basic right of assembly.

In terms of their physical appearance it is barely possible to draw a distinction between high-tech German army units and the armoured police that intervened so viciously in the anti-G8 mass demonstration in Rostock. Nevertheless, the blatant deployment of the German army in Heiligendamm, together with the lack of any serious political opposition to the move, must be taken as a severe warning of the measures being prepared by the German state to deal with domestic opposition to its policies.



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