Germany: Armed Forces memorial unveiled in Berlin

Bernd Reinhardt
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In November 2008, German President Horst Köhler addressed a forum on security policy in Berlin. He told those present, which included representatives of the military top brass, that the "re-orientation of the Bundeswehr [armed forces] from territorial defence to an army of intervention...has been successful." However one problem remaining, he said, was the lack of support among the population.

In June 2009, when three German soldiers died fighting in Afghanistan, the military criticized the public's lack of support, saying soldiers were frustrated and felt let down. Indirectly, the government stood accused that the regulations and rules for civilian missions gave the impression that the Afghanistan deployment was largely to aid development and reconstruction. Soldiers were increasingly hindered in combat situations, the government said, and the troops' unsatisfactory equipment was repeatedly criticized.

After Commissioner for the Armed Forces Reinhold Robbe (Social Democratic Party, SPD) called on the church, the trade unions and business to declare their support for the Bundeswehr in an article in *Bild-Zeitung*, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung awarded several soldiers the bravery medal, which had been reintroduced in 2008. Such award ceremonies were the first of their kind since the end of the Second World War.

At the beginning of September this year, a shocked public was for the first time confronted by the fact that the Bundeswehr was "an army in battle" when a German officer in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan called up American bombers to destroy two disabled tanker lorries, resulting in numerous civilian deaths. While opinion polls indicate the majority of the population support the immediate withdrawal of German soldiers, Merkel and Jung demonstratively stood behind the military.

The inauguration of a central memorial to the Bundeswehr on September 8, just a few days after this massacre, is a further step in the direction of militarism. It confirms the growing significance of military force as a legitimate political means of official German foreign policy. This was also confirmed by the list of guests attending the inauguration.

Alongside President Köhler on grounds of the defence ministry could be found representatives of various constitutional bodies, as well as high representatives of the Catholic and Protestant churches, along with parliamentary "representatives of the people." Defence Minister Jung thanked them expressly, saying the Bundeswehr needed "social support."

The numerous demonstrators were kept far from the ceremony by police and the inner courtyard of the highly symbolic Bendlerblocks, where the Nazis had once executed Hitler's would-be assassin Claus von Stauffenberg. Köhler affirmed the necessity for a fighting Bundeswehr abroad: "Our freedom and security require interventions—by us and the many nations that share our values. That is the reason why there is an army in our country." It was important, he said, that "we show our readiness to support international mandates for military actions and our readiness to then support such interventions with soldiers as well, as far as that is possible for us."

Köhler said that public discussion regarding "which deployments of the Bundeswehr parliament agrees, how they are equipped and what goals and timescales are set" should be marked "by sympathy and respect, by concern and acknowledgment for the Bundeswehr and its service. We may not absolve ourselves from this responsibility." The memorial, according to Köhler, is a place "where it becomes clear: People in Germany support their Bundeswehr."

The Nazi Wehrmacht and today's Bundeswehr

Even when it was founded in 1955, "people in Germany" did not support the Wehrmacht. After the collapse of the Third Reich, hardly anyone wanted ever again to take up arms. The initiative came from above. In discussions with its Western allies, the conservative Adenauer government pushed through German rearmament in the course of the country's impending entry into NATO.

Completely unabashed, they relied thereby on elements from the old Nazi Wehrmacht, from the few who, when Germany's military defeat was foreseeable, had then opposed Hitler in the name of "German interests." The first commander of the new "democratic" Bundeswehr was Hans Speidel, who, like the first general inspector Adolf Heusinger, was a former Nazi general. The badge of the new army followed the pattern of the medal that just years before had been awarded by the Nazis in great quantities, the Iron Cross. In 1958, 12,900 Bundeswehr officers had served previously in the former Nazi Wehrmacht.

New monuments to the various components of the Armed Forces—army, navy and air force—were erected, or existing ones from the Nazi period re-modelled, with the widespread opposition in the population being taken into account. After 1954, the Laboe naval memorial (erected in 1936) no longer referred to the fallen from the First World War but more generally to the "sailors of all nations lost at sea." Also, the military sought to make the "Memorial to the Luftwafe and to Aviation" (built in 1961) more all-embracing by the inclusion of a reference to civilian aviation.

Since 1961, when a civilian alternative to conscripted military service was established, the numbers of those refusing to undertake compulsory military service has constantly increased. At the end of the 1960s, at a time of mass protests against the Vietnam War, which was supported not only by the government but also by some trade unions, there were public demonstrations where soldiers burnt their military IDs and uniforms, and refused to carry out orders. At that time, any attempt to erect a national memorial to the army would have been unthinkable.

With entry into the UN in 1973, West Germany took to the stage of world politics, albeit in the context of the continuing stationing of American troops on German soil. One year before, and two years after SPD leader Willi Brandt had fallen to his knees at a ceremony in the former Warsaw ghetto, the Brandt SPD government inaugurated the "Memorial to the German Army" at the highly symbolic fortress of Ehrenbreitstein near Koblenz. It honours the soldiers who "gave their lives for Germany" in the First and Second World Wars, and is adorned with the symbol of the Iron Cross.

Although this monument was originally erected following the wars of liberation against Napoleon, it has never stood in a democratic tradition. The goal of the Prussian army leaders was to rescue the monarchy under the hegemony of Prussia. It was under the Iron Cross that the Paris commune was suppressed in 1871. The symbol adorned Germany's imperial warships in the Africa, German planes in the First World War and Hitler's panzer tanks in the "fight against Bolshevism." The medals recently bestowed by Merkel and Jung, as well as the motif on German military vehicles in Afghanistan, are based on the Iron Cross.

The failure of pacifism

The peace movement of the 1970s was also the cradle of the Greens. In this decade and the one that followed, thousands demonstrated to express their concern with the growing danger of war. These were the movements against the stationing of nuclear weapons in Germany, against the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Already at that time, the great weakness of this movement was its pacifist orientation. While abstractly rejecting war as such, it did not reject the capitalist basis of these wars. After the departure of American troops from Germany in the 1990s, against the background of increasing tensions both at home and abroad, the Greens gradually changed from defending capitalism in general to a defence of German capitalism in particular. In 1999, in the first year of the SPD-Green Party coalition government, they opened the way for the first foreign combat missions in Kosovo by the Bundeswehr, under the demagogic slogan of Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer, "never again Auschwitz."

Around this time, military memorials were being adapted to this new reality. In 2000, the submariners' memorial at Möltenort, whose tradition goes back from the Nazis to the Weimar Republic, and which had commemorated "all the dead of the U-boat service of both World Wars," was given a new inscription honouring "all those German submariners lost at sea." An additional tablet brought together the German Empire, Nazi Germany and the post-war period: It honours German submariners who were killed in 1911, 1936 and 1966, i.e., not only those who lost their lives within the framework of wars, but also in the course of their military service.

The memorial to the German army also received an important amendment in 2006. An inscription on a new pillar recognised the Bundeswehr soldiers who had given their lives "for peace, justice and freedom." This formulation was also incorporated into the Berlin memorial.

In the meantime, the inauguration of a central military memorial in the German capital speaks to the growing self-confidence and high value that the German elite attache to a combative Bundeswehr for the protection of German interests. That there is no desire to temper such considerations is shown by the location of the memorial, not in proximity to parliament, which decides upon military interventions, but in the grounds of the defence ministry (its placement being the only criticism of the Greens).

However, how the population is to be won to war is still causing a headache for government, parliament, military, church and media. One year ago, political weekly *Die Zeit*, which generally supports the SPD, called for an urgent discussion on a more convincing "ultima ratio" (final reason) for supporting war that is not limited to the loyal performance of one's military duties. "But what is this reason?" they ask. Is it "'peace and freedom,' as the memorial now reads, is it democracy or human rights? Or is it the lessons of the past?" Inside the churches there is talk about what constitutes a "just war," and the senior military cleric, Militärgeneralvikar Walter Wakenhut, has suggested the introduction of a day to commemorate the fallen members of the Bundeswehr.

After the transformation of the Greens into a party of war, pacifist clichés can still be heard in the Left Party, although with decreasing frequency. The Left Party rejected the memorial to the Bundeswehr on the grounds it promotes a "warrior mentality." At a demonstration against the war in Afghanistan, taking place at the same time that the new war memorial was being inaugurated, Left Party leader Gregor Gysi said he was for a memorial that also included civilians killed. This recalls the insidious attempt to make military memorials in Germany more acceptable again by mixing the commemoration of military and civilian dead.

National patriotism and loyalty to the state form the cornerstone of this party, whose roots can be traced back to the former state party of East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party (SED). Characteristically, the SED frequently extolled its particular form of German "socialist" interests by drawing from the same nationalist and undemocratic military traditions as the Bundeswehr in West Germany. The East German medal for bravery in a possible war against NATO, which was obviously designed along the lines of the Iron Cross, also bore the portrait of the Prussian General Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher.

The Left Party has since abandoned its initial opposition to the Afghanistan war, in order to be able to participate in the "public discussion" called for by President Köhler.