

# The revival of German militarism

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Last week, German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg introduced a new “combat medal” for the Bundeswehr (armed forces). Press reports have also called it a “decoration for combatants”. It will be awarded to soldiers who have “actively participated in combat operations at least once or have faced great personal danger in acts of terrorist or military violence.” It can be awarded posthumously.

The new order is symptomatic of the transformation that the Bundeswehr has undergone since German unification 20 years ago.

The Bundeswehr was founded in 1955 in the face of massive protests and opposition. Hitler’s Wehrmacht had been disbanded in 1945 by the victorious powers after it had laid waste to half of Europe in a war of aggression that killed millions of people. Following those experiences, broad sections of the population wanted to have no more to do with war and militarism.

In order to be socially accepted, the Bundeswehr had to be restricted to defensive duties. It was, the Constitution declared and the government pledged, to be used only for defense against an attack from abroad.

As a conscript army it had a high level of troops, but possessed no nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers or transport capacity that would enable it to undertake international operations. It stood on the European front line of the Cold War, and in the case of a real war would have suffered heavy losses. Notwithstanding its defensive pretensions and material limitations, it was part of the US-led imperialist NATO alliance and intended to serve the imperialist aims of the German bourgeoisie.

To conciliate public opinion, the government and media presented the Bundeswehr as though war, fighting and killing were not its real purpose, but rather things to be avoided. The ideal of the soldier that was promoted was not that of a combatant, but of a “citizen in uniform”. He was not presented as the docile

receiver of orders, but rather as the politically responsible individual in uniform. This conception ostensibly pervaded the officer corps as well as the ranks.

This has radically changed since German unification. The introduction of a new medal reflects this change. “For a long time we have heard very little about the citizen in uniform, but increasingly about combatants for German interests around the world. And good combat soldiers need not only proper equipment, but also recognition,” the *Frankfurter Rundschau* commented.

Shortly after German reunification in 1991, the policy objectives of the Bundeswehr were redefined in the official defense guidelines. Its duties now included, in addition to national defense, the “promotion and protection of worldwide political, economic, military and ecological stability” and the “maintenance of free world trade and access to strategic raw materials.”

In 1994, the Supreme Court paved the way for worldwide operations by the Bundeswehr by means of a novel interpretation of the Constitution. In 1998, the newly elected Social Democratic Party-Green Party government gave the OK for the first international combat mission—in Yugoslavia. Since then, German soldiers have been deployed to many conflict areas of the world. In Afghanistan alone there are up to 5,000 German soldiers. After the United States and Britain, Germany has the third largest contingent of troops in that country.

The current defense minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (Christian Social Union), has now taken on the task of completing the transformation of the Bundeswehr from a defensive force into an intervention force. His planned reforms include downsizing civilian administrative structures, strengthening the military command and streamlining the army, while at the same time increasing the number of soldiers that are available

for international operations.

With the suspension of compulsory military service, he has turned the Bundeswehr into a de facto professional army. Compulsory military service is being preserved on paper so that it can be immediately revived if, in the event of war, cannon fodder is required.

Guttenberg is also aggressively advocating the defense of German economic interests by military means. Until now, politicians had played down this issue, although it had long been enshrined in the defense policy guidelines.

Federal President Horst Köhler even resigned half a year ago after he was criticized for remarks in this direction. Guttenberg has publicly defended Köhler, stressing the “close connection” between “security and German economic interests”, in line with a classic imperialist foreign policy that does not shrink from the application of military force.

Guttenberg has been systematically built up by the media as a political star. This 38-year-old scion of an old Frankish noble family strides onto the political stage as the representative of a social layer that has played a devastating role in German history.

Between 1871—the year of the establishment of the Kaiser’s Empire—and 1945—the year of the defeat of the Third Reich—the German nobility set the tone in military and foreign policy. Reviewing history texts, one finds almost exclusively names with links to the aristocracy.

In post-war West Germany, the aristocracy was pushed into the background, but it remained in place. Guttenberg, whose family goes back to the 12th century, is well connected. His wife is a great-great-granddaughter of Otto von Bismarck. His mother, born Countess von Eltz, had a second marriage to the son of Hitler’s foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop. Before he went into politics, the current defense minister devoted himself to the administration of the family’s wealth, which includes large forests and estates as well as interests in a private hospital group, and is estimated at €600 million.

The Bundeswehr still has a long way to go before it possesses the clout of former German armies. With an annual budget of \$46 billion, German military spending is just one twelfth that of the US.

Even in relation to the size of the economy, Germany,

which spends 1.3 percent of its gross domestic product on the military, allocates far less than the US (4 percent), France (2.3 percent) and Britain (2.2 percent). The two latter countries account for half of Europe’s military spending.

But the new course has been set. It is only a matter of time before some shocking event is seized on by the state to attempt to break down widespread popular resistance to a massive increase in military spending for the re-tasked Bundeswehr.

The revival of German militarism, 65 years after the end of World War II, is a development of world-political significance. It is inseparable from the deep crisis of world capitalism. As the financial and economic conflicts between the great powers worsen, militarism is on the rise everywhere.

The US has long tried to offset its declining economic weight by exploiting its military superiority. Washington’s economic rivals in Europe and Asia are responding by upgrading their own military capabilities, and—in the words of Guttenberg—by emphasizing the “close connection between security and economic interests.”

The two world wars of the last century arose “inexorably from the contradictions of international capitalist interests,” as Leon Trotsky noted in 1940. Another world war is unavoidable if working people do not stop the capitalist warmongers in time and take up the struggle for the socialist transformation of society.

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