

German army targets youth with war propaganda

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When were these images last seen in Germany? Children clamber on tanks, sit in military helicopters, hold anti-tank weapons in their hand and receive orders from soldiers in uniform about their functions. The army and military equipment are shown as a seemingly acceptable part of free time and family excursions.

These images come from Germany's armed forces day, the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Bundeswehr on June 13. "Believe it or not, it was 60 years waiting for this day," states the Bundeswehr's official homepage. But now it was finally here: "German armed forces day is being celebrated for the first time at 15 locations nationwide."

The weapons displays, combat and tank manoeuvres, simulations of helicopter operations and personal discussions with soldiers, combined with entertainment activities aimed at children and families, were a spectacle orchestrated as a key part of the foreign policy shift announced by the German government early last year.

Already in 2012, in a speech at the German army's leadership academy in Hamburg, President Joachim Gauck called for a stronger role in society for the army and more public debate involving the military. "Generals, officers, soldiers—back to the heart of our society!" he proclaimed to his audience.

German armed forces day is only the latest highpoint in an intensive and comprehensive strategy by the army to recruit young people to serve in the military. Gauck's demand for the merging of civilian and military life recalls the darkest period of German history. Through the militarisation of society, the population is to be conditioned to accept war and violence as normal, and prepared for new wars.

The German army's plans have confronted widespread opposition among the population. Due to the crimes of German imperialism in two world wars, anti-war sentiment is powerful. As has been the case in the past,

the German army has failed to achieve its target of 15,000 to 20,000 new recruits annually.

The army has therefore been investing increasing sums of money to secure new trainees since 2011. While in 2009 only €3.8 million was spent on this, annual spending is now €29.9 million. This is increasing, with €35.3 million in spending planned for 2015.

A central role in the recruitment activities is being played by so-called youth officers and careers advisers, who seek to spread among young people the German army's goal, pronounced by defence minister Ursula Von der Leyen, to become "one of the most attractive employers in Germany." German armed forces day, which is to take place annually, is part of a comprehensive recruiting strategy at schools, job fairs and on the Internet.

Youth officers and career advisers, who are specially trained to work among young people, appear at training courses and in front of school classes across the country. They also organise troop visits. According to the children's support organisation Terre des hommes, between 300,000 and 400,000 pupils are reached annually through this work. In this way, the army influences teaching content at schools. This is taking place "currently throughout the entire federal republic," stated education journalist Armin Himmelrath in a radio interview with SWR in April.

Appearances by youth officers and career advisers are part of the compulsory curriculum. Pupils are only permitted to leave the military speeches if parents have previously submitted a written request for alternative lessons. However, soldiers often show up unannounced, making this option impossible.

Officers appear at schools as alleged objective experts in foreign and security policy, mainly speaking on foreign interventions and the threat of international terrorism. They not only seek to convince the youth of the correctness of military interventions around the globe, but

also of the lack of any alternative.

Along with its immediate presence in classes, the German army is also developing its own propaganda material for lessons. An example of this is the education magazine *Frieden und Sicherheit* (Peace and Security). The latest edition has the character of a summary of the foreign policy shift of the past year.

The editorial accuses Russia of threatening “the sovereignty of Ukraine” and striving “to revive a ‘new Russia.’” The European Union (EU) and NATO therefore faced “new challenges in their relations with Russia.” Further challenges are identified such as the Syrian civil war against dictator Bashar Al-Assad, the Islamic State, and unstable states in general, which are confronted “with the radicalisation of people, civil wars, and migration movements.”

The entire magazine attempts to create the impression that Germany has no other option but to respond to the challenges of the 21st century with a major rearmament programme and militarisation abroad and at home. Under the headline “Army in transformation,” Gauck’s notorious speech before the German army is cited. The section “Bundeswehr and society” defines the army’s tasks as, among other things, global interventions and “a contribution to domestic protection ... in internal emergency situations.”

The didactic and methodical suggestions contained in the guide for teachers accompanying the magazine confirm what is involved. Under “competencies and learning outcomes” it states: “identify possible actions with reference to peace and security for oneself and in connection with state, civil society and international organisations, as well as to reflect on and develop strategic concepts backed up by arguments for this.”

In other words, pupils are to be made strategists for German imperialism and, in the best cases, consider the “possibilities for action” for the Bundeswehr. To achieve this goal, the German army is constantly expanding its campaigns and collaborating with radio stations, television broadcasters and newspapers. The military even sponsors school buses so that it can print advertising on their timetables.

On its YouTube channel, with the programmatic slogan “We. Serve. Germany,” the German army publishes advertising for out-of-school sporting activities along with militarist war videos. Since 2012, it has been advertising on the youth magazine *Bravo*’s web site for its army adventure camps with colourful images and flowery text. The activities are directed at “girls and boys aged 16 and

17 with German citizenship.” The German army covers all costs.

In order to integrate itself into the daily lives of young people, the army has uploaded posters for young people’s bedrooms, desktop backgrounds with weapons and tanks, or school timetable planners with Eurofighter logos on its youth web site ready for download.

The increased attempts to subordinate schools to the interests of German militarism and win new recruits for the army have met with mounting opposition from pupils, parents and teachers.

On the Internet and in local communities, a number of initiatives have emerged protesting the militarisation of schools. In one prominent example, the Robert Blum gymnasium in Berlin took the decision at a school meeting in 2011 to ban any activities by the military.

On the other hand, there are schools where critical students have already been punished for protesting against the appearance of the military at their school and posing difficult questions. In February, a pupil at a school in Bamberg received a sharply worded warning for posing a question on the Kundus massacre in a career planning seminar in which the Bundeswehr participated as an employer, and later demonstrated with friends against the army’s presence during a break.

The warning was issued based explicitly on political grounds and contained the following threat: “To graduate successfully, he (the pupil) must be careful in the future to avoid making statements expressing his extremist political opinions.”

Regardless of the fact that the school administration withdrew the warning after public protest, the incident is particularly disturbing. Seventy years after the end of World War II and 60 years after the founding of the German army, a pupil speaking out against the return of German militarism has been branded an extremist and threatened with reprisals.



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