

German defence minister exploits refugee crisis to strengthen military

Wolfgang Weber
1 September 2015

German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen is using the refugee crisis to prepare a major deployment of the army within Germany. The armed forces will participate in the accommodation of refugees nationwide. Barracks are being revamped into refugee camps and soldiers brought in to carry out tasks normally assigned to civil authorities, such as registering refugees.

In this way, the refugees, who have virtually no rights, are being placed under the control of the German army. The strict ban on the deployment of the German army domestically, as well as the clear separation between civilian authorities and the security apparatus, have been anchored in law since 1949 due to the experiences of the Kaiserreich and the Nazis. These are now being eliminated. Once again the public will have to get used to the army playing a major role in the life of German society, just as the Reichswehr did in the past.

The elevation of the army to a leading role in social life is a declared goal of government policy. President Joachim Gauck called in 2012 for a stronger engagement for the army in society. “Generals, officers, army soldiers, back to the heart of our society!” he proclaimed to his audience.

Refugee “assistance”

According to its official web site, the German army has created places for 9,000 refugees in 18 barracks distributed across the country. Over 6,000 people have been accommodated in barracks or in buildings not being used by the army. Three thousand have been housed in other facilities not being used by the army, such as training camps. In addition, the army has put up over 140 tents in Hamburg, Halberstadt (Saxony-Anhalt) and Doberlug-Kirchheim (Brandenburg) for more than 1,200 refugees.

Defence Minister Von der Leyen justified this deployment of the German army after a visit to a barracks in Sonthofen, Bavaria, where refugees have been accommodated since last autumn. “We are assisting the refugees with all means at our disposal.” That is a transparent attempt to rehabilitate the image of the troops, which suffered due to the war in Afghanistan and other countries, and prepare for future military interventions abroad.

In reality, the German government and its NATO allies, with their military interventions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, the

Middle East and North Africa, have created the horrific conditions that have provoked the flood of refugees to Europe.

In a German army propaganda video of soldiers putting up tents in Doberlug-Kirchheim, the commanding officer of Special Infantry Battalion 164, Björn Panzer, bluntly referred to that context: “It is absolutely clear to the soldiers here, the majority of whom are veterans of operations, what they are doing, they know the conditions in the countries where they intervened...”

The banning of army deployments domestically has long been under attack. It began in 1968 with the adoption of emergency powers and has continued more recently following rulings by the German Constitutional Court.

The German army is going one step further with the current deployment. Until now, the deployment of the army domestically was always strictly limited both in terms of location and length of time, and justified by natural disasters, such as the flooding of the Elbe River in 2002 or the need to “combat terrorism” during the G8 summit in Heiligendamm. Since there is obviously no case of “defence” or “natural catastrophe” in the present circumstances, high-ranking politicians are raising the possibility of reforming Germany’s Basic Law.

“We need a new debate in Germany about whether we should deploy the army more forcefully domestically,” said the interior minister for Saxony-Anhalt, Holger Stahlknecht (Christian Democrats) at the end of July. The strict restrictions in the Basic Law were no longer appropriate to the times, he said. It was necessary to “consider reforming the Basic Law,” urged Stahlknecht, a Lieutenant Colonel in the reserves.

Taking control of official responsibilities

Perhaps even more significant than the deployment to house refugees is the assumption of police and other official tasks by German army soldiers. These tasks would otherwise only be conducted by authorities at the state and federal level.

In this way, the practical collaboration between civil authorities and the army is being tested. The expansion of the military infrastructure necessary for this, and the close integration of the army into every level of government, is the second key plank of the German army reform begun in 2010—the other being foreign

military interventions.

Soldiers from the signals division have thus been placed under the command of the European Union military operation “European Union Naval Force in Mediterranean” (EUNAVFORMED), which also includes the German navy. There they have the task of creating extensive profiles of the refugees rescued from the Mediterranean. This includes their route, country of origin, profession, relatives and helpers. The army is being supported in this by a “military signals unit” of the foreign intelligence service (BND).

The gathered data will help prepare military interventions in North African countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Morocco, which will be conducted under the pretext of disrupting refugee routes, boats and people smugglers. But it can also be used for the processing of asylum applications in Germany, against the refugees themselves.

This work, for which only officials of the federal office of migration and refugees (BAMF) are responsible, is now also being carried out by soldiers “in connection with assistance for official tasks”. Since May, up to 150 soldiers have been assisting BAMF “with the processing of asylum seeker applications,” as the official German army web site states.

This is to be further expanded. On Thursday, Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU) announced that he wanted to recruit up to 700 workers for BAMF for a short time and using unconventional means, including members of the army, “to accelerate asylum applications.”

Civilian and military collaboration

The integration of civilian and military structures has advanced considerably over recent years. A German army pamphlet in 2013 titled “New orientation: civilian-military cooperation by the German army,” gives some impression of the preparations for “wide-ranging territorial tasks” to be taken on domestically under the guise of “defence of the homeland” and “protection from catastrophes.”

The pamphlet makes clear the scale of these structures since the creation of a “territorial network” in 2006. Under the “armed forces command in Bonn”, “15 state commanders (work) from the seat of each state government.” Within the department “regional tasks Berlin,” 31 district commanders and 404 local commanders operate, each with between 10 and 12 positions. These are occupied by specially selected, militarily experienced and politically “absolutely reliable” soldiers.

Thus, for this “defence of the homeland”, over 4,000 reservists are involved, including over 3,000 reserve officers, concealed from the public and without even a veneer of democracy. They must live within the district in which they serve and be “rooted in their community.”

According to the army pamphlet, their tasks include “advising civilian disaster protection/crisis and administration offices about the possibilities and limits of support from the German army,”

“participation in meetings about the current situation as well as future plans in operation,” and “supporting and accepting requests for assistance from civilian authorities to the army as well as forwarding them to the relevant state commander.”

The armed forces integrated into this network are not only to “advise” and “support” civilian authorities, but will also organise their own deployments. “The command of territorial operations for the German army in Berlin” is “the nerve centre of the of the new territorial network.” It is “responsible for the tactical coordination of army deployments domestically.”

The pamphlet goes on to state, “On the basis of the civilian requirements for assistance, the territorial command centre (KdoTerrAufgBw) can alarm service units and troops, and bring together ad hoc an appropriate force of the German army to provide support.”

The types of “threats” to be tackled can currently be seen in Hungary, where there are discussions about deploying the army to repel the stream of refugees behind the newly-constructed border fence. By September, six “border hunter” units of 2,100 men are to be ready for deployment. There would “be no order to shoot in dealing with refugees,” said the regional police commander responsible, indicating what had already been discussed behind closed doors.

To sum up, the “civilian-military cooperation” is nothing more than the modern form of German militarism, “a system,” the military historian Wolfram Wette wrote, “which integrates state, economic, ideological and social sectors, making military interests operational.”

A century ago Karl Liebknecht, the revolutionary and indefatigable opponent of war, denounced the same process as a “system of submerging our entire public and private life under the spirit of militarism.” (“Militarism and Anti-militarism,” 1907)

At that time, under the Kaiser, this system prepared the way for and assisted in the waging of the First World War. In the early years of the Weimar Republic, it enabled Germany to suppress the revolutionary struggles of the working class, which overthrew the Kaiser and brought an end to World War I. Later, it played an important role in the establishment of the fascist Nazi dictatorship.

The deployment of the German army to “assist refugees” is “for now” presented in humanitarian terms. But the dangers lurking in the background are the same. They must, especially in Germany, be taken seriously by the working population.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact