

Opposition mounts to German military advertising campaign

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Almost every large German city now features signs and billboards praising the services of the German military (Bundeswehr) and calling on people to do their “duty.” In many bus, tram and underground stations, as well as at schools, universities and education centres, the Bundeswehr has been campaigning with provocative slogans like “Do something that really counts” and “You can’t solve crises by hanging around and drinking tea.”

The propaganda campaign is part of the return of militarism launched by President Joachim Gauck and the German government at the Munich Security Conference in 2014. Since that time the Defence Ministry has been working hard to create a combat-ready army and recruit soldiers for military interventions in the Middle East and Africa.

In early December, Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen (Christian Democrats, CDU) presented the Bundeswehr’s new human resources strategy. The issue, her report argued, was to “have men and women with the right qualifications in the right place at the right time.” It continued, “In this way we guarantee the readiness of personnel to deploy, fulfill our obligations in a broad, shifting spectrum of interventions and make it possible for Germany to play an appropriate role in security policy.”

Since the end of compulsory military service on July 1, 2011, the Bundeswehr has faced major problems in attracting and training new recruits. As the parliamentary representative for army affairs, Hans-Peter Bartels (Social Democrats, SPD), complained recently in *Handelsblatt* (a leading business newspaper), “In June 2016 we had the smallest Bundeswehr ever.”

To counter this trend, the Bundeswehr has organised an advertising campaign aimed at youth and young

adults. In 2015 alone, the Defence Ministry spent €35.2 million [US\$37.5 million] on career advertising. This is €23.2 million more than in 2010, shortly before the end of compulsory military service. Costs for career advertising have thus nearly tripled.

So-called youth officers visit schools to appeal to students to join up. They offer the prospect of stable living conditions, as well as training or studying at university. These are offers that, given the miserable social conditions and lack of opportunities on the labour market, certainly sound attractive. The Bundeswehr is even prepared to appeal to children. When pictures of this year’s “Bundeswehr Day” were published in the media in which children were visible while smiling soldiers showed them how to handle a machine gun, they provoked a wave of protests.

A look at the Bundeswehr’s web site underscores that the army is deliberately targeting very young people. A school practicum of between two and three weeks is offered for children as young as 10, involving the “civilian sector” as well as “the armed forces.” The practicum placements are located “generally in military institutions and the temporary colleagues are usually soldiers, so that our practicants have sufficient opportunities to get an impression of the Bundeswehr as an employer.”

The Child Soldier Alliance, whose members include Amnesty International Germany and UNICEF Germany, regularly criticises the German government for recruiting minors. In its “Shadow report on child soldiers” from 2013, it warned, “It seems possible that the number of minors in the Bundeswehr will increase. The Bundeswehr undertakes comprehensive advertising campaigns that increasingly target minors.”

This is precisely what has occurred. The number of minors who are being trained to use weapons is steadily

increasing. While in 2010, 496 minors joined the Bundeswehr, so far this year there have been 1,576 recruits.

The centrepiece of the recruiting campaign among youth is the online series “The recruits.” It appears five days a week on YouTube and chronicles the training of 12 young recruits over three months. The Bundeswehr spent €1.7 million on the series. An additional €6.2 million has been spent on advertising on Facebook and other social media outlets.

The series recalls the “docu-soaps” broadcast on private television channels. With music in the background and humorously constructed characters, the daily lives of the “recruits” are made out to be like an adventure holiday with sporting challenges. While the first episodes mainly focus on discipline and the tough life of a soldier, the army as a whole is presented as a “cool squad,” where everyone sticks together and supports each other. This fits in with the advertising slogan, “What do 1,000 online friends amount to compared to one comrade?”

But none of this can conceal the actual purpose of the training: a new generation is to fight in foreign interventions in the interests of German imperialism and, if necessary, die. While Von der Leyen boasts of the great response her campaign has received, opposition is growing among young workers and students.

Numerous videos on YouTube comment on and question the Bundeswehr series. A web site set up by the “Peng! Collective,” which effectively mocked the Bundeswehr campaign, attracted some 150,000 visits, more than the Bundeswehr’s official site. On the deceptively realistic web site, the career suggestions from the Bundeswehr were replaced by “doctor,” “teacher” and “refugee assistant,” and the slogans replaced with phrases such as “Your life for the powerful” and “War can destroy you.”

The campaign has also provoked resistance at universities. At the University of Hamburg, a protest by the general student representative committee led to the student centre no longer carrying the Bundeswehr’s advertising in the cafeterias.

At the end of November, the student parliament at Berlin’s Humboldt University (HU) spoke out against army advertising at the university. The university’s International Youth and Students for Social Equality

(IYSSE) chapter introduced the resolution. The text, adopted by the majority in the parliament, read, “The student parliament opposes all forms of advertising for the Bundeswehr at our university and calls upon the Berlin student centre and university management not to permit any Bundeswehr advertising initiatives on the HU campus.”



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