

# German military historian calls for army leadership to assume more political power

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Anyone wishing to know how far advanced the return of German militarism is behind the scenes should read the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s guest opinion piece from last Tuesday. It was a direct appeal to the German general staff to intervene once again into foreign and domestic affairs so as to rearm Germany and lead it in the direction of war.

Under the headline “Citizens in uniform,” military historian Sönke Neitzel urged, “The German army is in a crisis. Now is the time for the generals to raise their voice.”

Neitzel connected his demand with crisis situations at the international and national level. He wrote, “The army has not concerned the people as much as it has done over recent days for a long time. Trump, Putin, ISIS, Mali and then Pfullendorf. The full range of issues are affected: from the grand strategy to rearmament problems, the sensitive topic of Germany’s role in misdirected air strikes in Syria, and domestic leadership.”

In times of war, the “general staff,” meaning “those close to 200 top officers in the pay brackets B 6 to B 10,” are simply better politicians, according to Neitzel. “Journalists and scholars may be able to comment on the conflicts of our time more or less intelligently,” he commented. “But military experts are in a much better position to determine what is going on in Syria, Iraq or Mali.” Their opinion should therefore “be heard, and not just in small trusted circles, but also from society, which ultimately pays these men (and two women) with its taxes.”

As a military historian, Neitzel knows very well the grim traditions upon which he is basing his demand. Under the Kaiser and in the Weimar Republic, Germany’s general staff took on the role of a state within a state, which contributed significantly to the

rise of authoritarianism and the coming to power of Hitler, and brutally suppressed all domestic opposition to this.

Following the horrific crimes of the Supreme Army Command (OHL) during the First World War, General Ludendorff participated in the 1920 right-wing Kapp putsch and played a leading role three years later in Hitler’s march to Munich. General Paul von Hindenburg became German president in 1925 and appointed Hitler as chancellor in January 1933.

After the catastrophe of World War II, even national conservative historian Friedrich Meinecke declared that German militarism was “the historical power ... which did the most to promote the construction of the Third Reich.” And the archconservative post-war Chancellor Konrad Adenauer felt compelled to promise in parliament in 1954 that there would never be such a “central position” for the ambitious officer corps of the past in Germany.

This is now to change. Neitzel stated, “It was certainly never intended that the general staff play a major role in public discourse or even in the politics of the Federal Republic.” But then he added provocatively, “However, 60 years after the founding of the army, the misgivings about the general staff are no longer appropriate. No reasonable person can doubt the loyalty of this small state elite. As a social group, they perhaps have their own idiosyncrasies, but this applies no less to other groups. It is simply a waste of their competencies if they don’t speak up and remain cut off from the public.”

Neitzel, in fact, effectively admits that the “idiosyncrasies” of the German generals remain the same as they were on the eve of World War I and World War II. At issue is the rearmament of the military and preparations for war.

Neitzel complained, “This army is a shadow of itself, as we are always quietly being told by foreign militaries. It is at best adequate for small training and stabilisation missions, and a demonstration of power—as long as everything stays quiet and no serious fighting is required. Even with rising military budgets, it will take eight to 10 years before the army has large units capable of being deployed.”

Nobody should underestimate these words. There can be no doubt that Neitzel’s comment was prepared in consultation with the highest circles in politics and the military, which have been working feverishly for some time to make Germany Europe’s leading military power, in spite of the widespread opposition to this within the population.

Neitzel has played a key role in this. In 2015 and 2016, he contributed to the drafting of the army’s White Paper 2016, Germany’s official military doctrine, which called for more foreign military interventions and the use of the army domestically. The study programme “War and conflict studies,” which he oversees at the University of Potsdam, is based on direct collaboration with the army’s Centre for Military History and Social Sciences (ZSMBW).

As a “historian,” Neitzel plays a similar role as the two professors from Humboldt University, Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowski. Like them, Neitzel is working systematically to rewrite the history of the World Wars I and II so as to whitewash the crimes of German imperialism and prepare for new ones.

Significantly, Neitzel jointly authored an article in *Die Welt* in early 2014 titled, “Why Germany wasn’t solely to blame,” which sharply attacked historian Fritz Fischer (1908-99) and claimed that the German leadership had mainly been pursuing a “defensive goal,” driven by “fears of decline and concerns about being encircled.” In his best known work, “Grab for World Power,” Fischer demonstrated Germany’s responsibility for the outbreak of World War I and the continuity of German war aims between the first and second world wars.

Neitzel is also involved in efforts to downplay the crimes of the Nazis. On the 75th anniversary of the Wehrmacht’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Neitzel appeared alongside Baberowski on public television broadcaster ARD to call into question the historical fact that the eastern offensive was part of a planned war of

annihilation. When he was asked by the moderator of the discussion, “Was it the completion of Hitler’s long-conceived plan for Lebensraum in the east, or was he mainly responding to the conflict situation?” Neitzel answered, “It was a bit of both. The question is always whether we actually believe that Hitler had a plan.”

Today, Neitzel is going a step further and downplaying the Nazi leader himself. In line with the comments of Donald Trump’s press secretary Sean Spicer, Neitzel made the outrageous statement in a *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* article a few days ago that Hitler did not use chemical weapons during the Second World War. “Outlawed internationally since the Geneva Protocol of 1925, even Hitler didn’t use it during World War II, even though his arsenal was well stocked with the nerve gas sarin, among other things,” he wrote.

While Spicer was strongly criticised around the world, nobody in the media or official politics was troubled by Neitzel’s comment. Nor did his appeal to the general staff, which in essence violates Germany’s Basic Law, meet with any criticism. On the contrary, the same political circles which have been planning the resurrection of German militarism behind the backs of the public for three years are now desperately trying to suppress mounting opposition to it.

At Berlin’s Humboldt University, the presidium has declared any criticism of the positions of Neitzel’s colleagues, Baberowski and Münkler, to be “unacceptable.” The current president of Humboldt University is none other than the Social Democrat politician Sabine Kunst, who, as science minister in the Brandenburg state government, appointed Neitzel to the position of professor of military history and cultural history of violence at the University of Potsdam in 2015.



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