

German military historian Sönke Neitzel evokes the traditions of Hitler's Wehrmacht

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In April, an extensive neo-Nazi network was discovered in the German Bundeswehr (Armed Forces), which planned terrorist attacks against high-ranking politicians and glorified Hitler's army (the Wehrmacht). Barely three months later, leading newsweekly *Der Spiegel* has published an interview in which the military historian Sönke Neitzel praises the Wehrmacht and plays down the right-wing terror in which it participated.

Neitzel insists that the Bundeswehr must stand in the tradition of the Wehrmacht because it must be an "instrument of battle." He declares that "tank grenadiers and paratroopers" can "hardly be offered non-combative role models." They "should be able to fight and kill," and therefore they cannot limit themselves to "elements of traditions" that correspond to liberal democratic principles.

The Bundeswehr is "a military organization and not a branch office of the Federal Centre for Civic Education," the professor continues. This orientation is not consistent with accepting only the resistance [to the Nazis] within the Wehrmacht as the basis for inspiring traditions, he says. One can also "act in an exemplary manner in a total war for a criminal regime... for example, in providing leadership or as a successful soldier like [Helmut] Lent."

Lent, whom Neitzel praises, was a leader of the 3rd night fighter squadron who was styled a war hero by Nazi propaganda. In his funeral oration, Hermann Göring described him as a "supporter of our National Socialist [Nazi] world outlook." Even the Bundeswehr's Centre for Military History and Social Sciences, which seeks to whitewash the history of the Bundeswehr, concluded that Lent was a "career-conscious air force officer" who "largely conformed and complied with the system."

For Neitzel, not only Nazi propaganda heroes are to be revered for their military achievements, but Hitler's Wehrmacht as a whole. "The initiative to want to win, to thrust forward, loyalty to duty—are all military qualities

that remain valid," he declares.

His glorification of the Wehrmacht is directly connected to the relativization of the bestial crimes for which Hitler's army was responsible. The unprovoked attack on the Soviet Union, with the aim of destroying 30 million Slavic civilians, is presented by military historian Neitzel merely as a problematic war tactic.

"There are decision-making possibilities in every war," states Neitzel, "and the German army chose the most violent solution in many, many situations. But this should not obscure the fact that the Wehrmacht, as a 'fighting organization,' was also successful."

One wonders what successes Neitzel is talking about. The massacres of civilians? The mass murder of communists? The annihilation of the European Jews? One gets a clue when the professor talks about "Operation Zigeunerbaron," in which the victims included "innocent civilians."

In fact, "Operation Zigeunerbaron" was a brutal anti-partisan operation in which all male civilians between 15 and 65 were arrested in the forests around Brjansk. The remaining population was expelled and their villages burnt down. Estimates are that only 20 to 30 percent of the more than 1,500 killed were partisans. The rest were civilians.

Neitzel himself implicitly declares the trivialization of such atrocities and the glorification of the Wehrmacht as "tradition-making" and necessary to make the Bundeswehr an "instrument of battle."

In this, he outlines a project in which he and other professors, such as Humboldt University professors Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowski, have been working for some time. In the face of the revival of German militarism and plans for a massive upgrading of Germany's military forces, they are seeking to rewrite history. German imperialism is to be washed clean of its historic crimes in order to prepare new wars.

The political scientist Münkler summed this up when he declared in connection with World War I: “It is hardly possible to conduct a responsible policy in Europe if one has the idea that we have been guilty of everything. With regard to 1914, that is a legend.”

Neitzel himself went further and implied that Germany had only defended itself. According to Neitzel in January 2014, together with other authors in *Die Welt*, the German leadership pursued a “defensive aim,” driven by “fear of losing [Germany’s] position and its encirclement.”

On the 75th anniversary of the 1941 attack on the Soviet Union, in a round-table discussion together with Baberowski broadcast by Phoenix, he questioned whether Hitler had planned the war of extermination in the east. Asked the question, “Was that the execution of Hitler’s long-cherished plan of *Lebensraum* in the east, or was he reacting primarily to the war situation?” Neitzel replied: “It was a bit of both. There is always the question of whether we can really believe that Hitler had a plan.” This year, he claimed that Hitler had not used poison gas in World War II!

The trivialization of the historical crimes of German imperialism goes hand in hand with the trivialization of today’s neo-Nazi networks in the Bundeswehr. The professor understands very well that such right-wing networks are not only a product of militarization, but also a prerequisite for a brutal army of intervention.

“A suspected right-wing terrorist pops up and, fearing for her office, she picks a fight over traditions,” Neitzel commented in relation to the attempts of Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen to cover her own tracks and make token gestures after the terrorist plot was uncovered.

But it was not, as Neitzel argues, a matter of a single presumed right-wing terrorist popping up, but an extensive neo-Nazi network that was systematically covered up by superiors. Two Bundeswehr officers were arrested because they stole weapons and planned terrorist attacks on high-ranking government officials and left-wing politicians and activists.

According to investigators, the immediate terrorist circle was comprised of at least seven individuals. But a broad support network was soon uncovered, situated at the Bundeswehr University in Munich and numerous other locations, and with close ties to the far-right movement.

Wehrmacht mementos and Nazi graffiti were discovered in a common room in the Illkirch barracks of the two chief suspects. Since the connection between the neo-Nazi

terrorist cell and this glorification of the Nazi army was all too obvious, von der Leyen announced several investigations. But for Neitzel, this goes too far. He describes the search for “supposed Nazi memorabilia” as “silly” and proceeds to defend the Wehrmacht.

Neitzel’s trivialization of Nazi crimes and today’s neo-Nazi networks must be taken very seriously. It is an expression of the dynamism and brutality of the newly revived German militarism. Neitzel himself is closely connected with the Bundeswehr and enjoys links with the highest circles. The “War and Conflict Studies” course at the University of Potsdam that he leads is based on direct collaboration with the Bundeswehr’s Centre for Military History and Social Sciences.

In 2015 and 2016, he was involved in the drafting of the 2016 White Paper of the Bundeswehr, Germany’s official foreign policy doctrine, which calls for more foreign operations and the deployment of the Bundeswehr domestically. In April of this year, in a commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, he demanded that “the German generals raise their voices” and intervene in politics more vigorously in order to upgrade Germany’s military capabilities and put them on a war footing.

Neitzel receives political support for his extreme right-wing theses above all from the Social Democratic Party. It was the Social Democrat Sabine Kunst, the then-minister of science in the Brandenburg state executive, who appointed Neitzel professor of military history in Potsdam in 2015. As the current president of Humboldt University, Kunst now declares all criticism of Baberowski’s right-wing positions to be “unacceptable” and threatens critics with criminal prosecution.



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