The German army's Nazi heritage

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Two developments in recent days illustrate the extent of ultra-right thinking and activities in the German army (Bundeswehr) that are supported and covered up at the highest level.

Last Thursday, the German television investigative programme "Panorama" reported on a far-right incident involving the Bundeswehr's special forces unit, KSK. The elite unit KSK is stationed in the town of Calw in the state of Baden-Württemberg and operates under strict secrecy.

"Panorama" reported that the incident occurred on April 27 at a farewell party for a KSK company commander. Far-right music was heard at the party with drunken soldiers singing loudly in accompaniment. Four soldiers are alleged to have stretched out their arms in a Hitler salute.

A woman had informed the "Panorama" editorial office about the incident some months ago. She was invited to the ceremony by a friend who worked for the KSK. The commander was expected to navigate an obstacle course that, according to the woman's testimony, included the throwing of pig heads. At the end of the obstacle course, the woman was expected to be the "sex prize" for the commander. According to the woman, the only reason why the commander did not exploit her sexually was because he was too drunk—like many of the other soldiers.

The planned sex was supposed to be on a consensual basis, but the victim was repelled by the right-wing music. She noted the text of the music and then sought out the band responsible. The band in question is called Sturmwehr, a World War II Nazi shock troop. The group has appeared at concerts organised by the neo-Nazi German National Party (NPD). In 2004, the band recorded an album of far-right songs that NPD supporters then distributed free of charge to children and young people at their schools.

The text included lyrics such as, "Poor Germany, what has become of you? Poor Germany, they are out to kill you," and was played at the KSK party, according to "Panorama." The text continues: "Once a country of greatness, culture and strong workers, you have managed to run yourself down in nearly 60 years." The song then refers positively to the Nazi regime and presents Germany's post-war history as one of continual national decline.

The Bundeswehr has confirmed that the retirement party for the KSK commander did take place. In an e-mail to the editor of "Panorama," army representatives declared that the obstacle course took place under the motto "Roman-medieval games," including the slicing of melons and pineapples with a sword and the tossing of pig's heads. The army has promised an internal enquiry to investigate the allegations of Hitler salutes and playing of far-right music.

According to Hanspeter Bartels (SPD), the German parliamentary defence commissioner, any use of Hitler salutes or far-right songs should be regarded as "beyond tasteless. This would also possibly be a criminal offence."

The incident at the KSK is not an isolated case, but is symptomatic of an army under the influence of the far-right as an integral part of its tradition. This is most clearly shown in the case of the naming of Bundeswehr barracks.

Following the discovery of a far-right group, involving army officers who planned terrorist acts and would then blame refugees, German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen announced a review of the Bundeswehr and its traditions. She declared that the modern Bundeswehr had nothing in common with Hitler's army and promised to rename barracks that bear the names of leading Nazi officers. Her proposal was criticised at the time by leading generals.

It is now clear that her initiative was merely empty talk. In response to a parliamentary question, it has

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been revealed that a number of Bundeswehr barracks bearing the names of officers active during the Third Reich will not be renamed.

In four cases, the names of the barracks are to be retained. Three of the barracks are named after Nazi officers.

The Rommel barracks in the Augustdorf district of North Rhine-Westphalia will keep its name. Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox," was one of Hitler's favourite officers and was elevated to the status of war hero by Goebbels's propaganda ministry. It was only at the end of the war that he fell into disgrace and was forced to commit suicide.

Two other military officers are also regarded as suitable role models for the Bundeswehr. Two barracks in the Lower Saxony town of Munster are to retain their names: the Bamm and Schulz-Lutz barracks. Who were these men?

Peter Bamm served as a military physician in World War II, first in France and later in Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. Adelbert Schulz was a brigadier general and commanded a division of the Wehrmacht. He was active in the invasion of the Sudetenland and Austria. He was awarded the Iron Cross in 1940 for his rapid advance in the French campaign and the breakthrough to Cherbourg on the English Channel. Schulz was also awarded the Knight's Cross, first and second class. He received, as well, several awards for his military role on the Eastern Front before he died in battle in January 1944 in Ukraine.

Only one barracks is to change its name. The General Thomsen barracks in a North Frisian town are to be renamed the Südtondern Barracks. In World War I, Hermann von der Thomsen fought in the German Luftwaffe. The then-68-year-old played a leading role in 1935 under the Nazis in re-establishing the Luftwaffe. Despite being blind by this time, he was appointed Luftwaffe general.

The *Junge Welt* newspaper has reported that discussion about a possible renaming was not carried out at a number of barracks, meaning their names will be retained. This includes barracks named after leading generals who served under Hitler and then participated in establishing the post-war Bundeswehr during the 1950s. A possible renaming has yet to be decided at another seven Bundeswehr locations.

In its reply to a question by the Left Party, the government declared that any new renaming of army sites will be decided on location by the respective post commands.

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