

Report by German armed forces commissioner prompts calls for rearmament

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The German parliamentary armed forces commissioner's annual report has triggered a wave of hysteria in the media and political parties.

The report, made public on Tuesday, deliberately paints a picture of a ramshackle, dysfunctional army. The report complained about "an enormous personnel shortage" and material shortcomings: "Ongoing armaments projects all too often suffered from delivery delays, purchased equipment was too often not ready for use, replacement parts were missing everywhere. This was the situation for aircraft and helicopters, ships and submarines, tanks and vehicles in the year under review."

At the end of the year under review, the report stated that none of the 14 A400M transport aircraft in service had been operational for some time. Not even one of the six German submarines was operational by the end of the year. Some progress was made in the area of personal equipment, "but the supply of important items like protective vests was insufficient," the report added.

A wave of outrage swept through the media. "The soldiers are obviously extremely annoyed," wrote the daily *Tagesspiegel*. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* warned that the army "has a right to be equipped for the operations assigned to it in such a way that it can fulfil its mission." The *Leipziger Volkszeitung* asked "whether there is any willingness in Germany to provide the soldiers with sufficient resources."

The *Badische Zeitung* declared that the armed forces are "regarded by many in this country as a militarist work of the devil. One consequence of this: wilful neglect."

Politicians from all parties, from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the Left Party, demanded immediate steps be taken. Georg Pazderski, deputy AfD

parliamentary group leader and a former army officer, accused the Defence Minister of "causing the ruin of her army." The Free Democratic Party fraction demanded a reform of the procurement system, declaring, "The annual report shows in a frightening way how bad the state of our armed forces is after years of cutting spending to the bone."

Green Party security policy spokesman Tobias Lindner complained, "Despite many announcements and a change of course, nothing measurable has happened." His colleague from the Left Party parliamentary group, Matthias Höhn, demanded: "The army has to refocus its mission as enshrined in the Basic Law: the defence of the nation." Left Party deputy Christine Buchholz complained, "Obviously the army does not focus on its people."

The parliamentary armed forces commissioner has the official task as "the soldiers' attorney" of monitoring the protection of their fundamental rights and ensuring, as an auxiliary body of parliament, parliamentary control over the armed forces. However, the current incumbent, the Social Democrats (SPD) deputy Hans-Peter Bartels, sees himself as an auxiliary organ of the armed forces, which holds a gun to the head of parliament. Large passages of his report read as if they had been prepared by military generals or by defence industry lobbyists.

The report cites the army's expanding tasks, which it presents with obvious pride, as the main reason for these shortcomings: "While foreign deployments outside of Alliance territory, 'out of area', in Africa, Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Mediterranean and elsewhere have so far been the focus of the challenges to be overcome, since 2014 the capacity to participate in collective defence within Alliance territory has become equally important."

The army has a “key role” with its “advanced presence on NATO’s eastern flank. Personnel, equipment, weapons and ammunitions must be readily available. ... An initiative to speed this up is needed.”

In addition, Bartels mentioned a third operational area for the army which also requires considerable resources: domestic operations. “The deployment of the armed forces to defend against terrorism, which was discussed in the year under review and tested by an exercise conducted under the direction of the police, represents another potential task for which, as is the case for the military’s core business in collective defence and ‘out of area’ missions, a fully equipped and fully staffed force is required,” according to his report.

Bartels knows full well that Germany’s Basic Law strictly prohibits the domestic deployment of the armed forces. The reason for this is the devastating role played by the military under the Nazis and in the century before.

As early as 1849, when Prussian troops crushed the democratic revolution throughout Germany, the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV declared: “Soldiers are the only cure against democrats.” In 1919 Minister of Defence Gustav Noske (SPD) ordered troops to suppress workers’ protests and the Spartacus rebellion. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered by soldiers. And at the end of the Weimar Republic, the officers’ caste, functioning as a state within the state, played a decisive role in paving the way for Hitler to take power.

The fact that Bartels nonetheless calls for “a fully equipped and fully staffed army” for domestic use reveals the actual purpose of the rearmament hysteria. The international military interventions and military build-up against Russia, for which the army is being rearmed, find no support among the population. In addition, there is the enormous cost of rearmament, which will inevitably entail further social cuts.

The armed forces commissioner’s annual report gives an indication of the vast sums involved.

“Significantly increased defence expenditure is required for the planned ‘trend reversals’ in personnel (an additional 12,000 military and 5,400 civilian posts by 2024) and equipment (defence investments amounting to €130 billion by 2030, calculated from 2017 onwards),” the report states. This means, for

example, that in the next 12 years, an average of at least €10 billion per year will have to be earmarked for the development and procurement of new defence equipment alone. In the 2017 budget, it was €5.9 billion.

But that is far from enough to meet the demands of the military. According to the Bartels report, the financial plan of the outgoing government, which provides for “increased defence expenditure” from €37 billion in 2017 to €42.4 billion in 2021, is expected to “compensate for expected cost increases in salaries, material maintenance and operating costs, but leaves little room for substantial improvements in military investment.” The share of gross domestic product spent on defence would thus remain around 1.2 percent. In order to reach the NATO target of 2 percent, “additional efforts are necessary.”

This massive rearmament programme cannot be imposed by democratic means. It will inevitably meet with resistance. Bartels therefore calls for a “fully equipped army” to be deployed domestically.

The armed forces commissioner’s annual report is part of the incoming grand coalition’s future plans. It confirms that the return to militarism and great power politics is the central focus for the SPD and conservative parties. Bartels, who has been a member of the SPD for 39 years and a member of parliament for 20 years, is one of the key figures in the defence policy establishment as chairman of the defence committee and as parliamentary commissioner for the armed forces. He also has close ties with the SPD leadership.



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