

# Massive forest fire in Germany exposes deadly legacy of World War II

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More than one week after the outbreak of a massive forest fire in the north-eastern German state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania the danger is still not over. Munition remains and unexploded ordnance from World War II have severely hampered the fire fighting and made it almost impossible in large areas.

The fire on a former military training base near Lübtheen has spread to 1,300 hectares (3,200 acres), making it the largest forest fire in the country's history. Clouds of smoke can still be seen from space, and the smell of burning was at times perceptible in Berlin. The cause of the fire is still unclear; there is talk of arson. But the unusually high temperatures and drought have also likely played a role.

The fire has brought the deadly consequences and long-term effects of militarism and war into the public consciousness once more. Just last week, two Bundeswehr (armed forces) fighter jets crashed over the Mecklenburg lake district. The region only barely evaded a disaster.

A disaster alert was proclaimed last week in the district of Ludwigslust-Parchim. Five villages were evacuated within minutes. Their inhabitants, almost a thousand people in all, had to move to the surrounding villages and the nearby town of Lübtheen. In many cases, they hardly had time to take the bare necessities. Most were able to return by Friday morning, but the village of Alt Jabel, which is closest to the forest fire, remains closed.

Up to 3,000 members of the fire brigade, the THW disaster relief organization, the Federal Police and the Bundeswehr were on duty around the clock for five days. They fought the fire from the air with helicopters, and on the ground from a safe distance. First, they had to secure the villages and with the help of specialised clearance vehicles drive miles of tracks through the

forest which had to be freed from munitions before the fire department could approach the flames.

No one could approach the fire closer than 1,000 meters since there was an acute danger to life. The unexploded ordnance and ammunition in the forest floor could be ignited at any time by the fire's heat and explode. According to the statement of the state Environment Minister Till Backhaus (Social Democratic Party, SPD), trial excavations in this area found up to 45.5 tonnes of munition remains per hectare of forest.

The entire site, which belongs to the Federal Republic, is full of unexploded ordnance and sites contaminated with explosives. But where does this all come from? Who has contaminated this area with such deadly scrap?

First, there is the Nazi regime. From 1936 to 1945, the Wehrmacht (Nazi Armed Forces) maintained the Navy's largest ammunition depot in the area. The artillery arsenal consisted of 300 buildings and bunkers. After the war, they were blown up under the supervision of the Red Army, but not all ammunition was destroyed.

Second, the unexploded ordnance still lying here comes from Allied offensives in World War II. "The area around Berlin was once the main battleground in the Second World War," Claus Rüdiger Seliger, chief forester of the Spree-Neisse region, told the *Tagesspiegel*. "We also find a lot of unexploded ordnance in the towns and cities."

Third, after the war, the National People's Army (NVA) used the area for military exercises in the former East Germany (GDR). And fourth, after 1989, the Bundeswehr used the forest area as a military training ground. In 2013, when military exercises were halted on the site, it left whole areas contaminated with

tons of explosives. Since then, the Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania munitions clearance service has been tasked with clearing these areas.

In the Nazis naval ordnance depot there were still “really massive shells” left, said the chief of the ordnance clearance operation, Robert Mollitor, and there are still “a lot of ammunition in the ground.”

When asked how long it will take for everything to be cleared, Mollitor confirmed that this would not be done any time soon: “When you talk about a hundred years, that’s a time span you could say we would manage it in. Or 200 years,” he added.

The forest area near Lübtheen is not the only forest littered with old munitions: in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania alone, according to official estimates, 38,000 hectares are contaminated with munitions, which is four percent of the state’s total area. In the other federal states too, the ground is still full of munitions.

In Hesse, the extremely hot weather last weekend led to a forest fire south of Frankfurt near the former munition depot at Münster-Breitfeld (Darmstadt-Dieburg). There, too, firefighters had to work under life-threatening conditions.

At the same time, unexploded ordnance from the Second World War is being discovered again and again in cities and towns. These explosives must be defused under great danger, and then be cleared from housing estates and entire neighbourhoods. On July 4, another 500-kilo unexploded bomb from the war was found in Bielefeld, leading to over 700 residents being evacuated. In Frankfurt in September 2017, over 60,000 inhabitants had to be evacuated from their apartments for the removal of a bombshell.

The flames of the latest forest fire illuminate the general insanity of the policies currently being pursued by the current imperialist governments. In Berlin, where the grand coalition of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats is doubling defence spending, at NATO, which conducts exercises for a World War III just off the Russian border, and the Trump administration in the US, which recently came within ten minutes of launching a war against Iran.

Nearly three-quarters of a century have passed since the end of World War II, but its deadly legacy still breaks out anew with deadly force. Thus, this terrible experience of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania adds

another strong argument for the fight against militarism and war.



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