

# Sixty-five years of the Bundeswehr: German president appeals for militarism, rearmament and war

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Germany's ruling class is using the 65th anniversary of the German army (Bundeswehr) to intensify its aggressive push for a return to militarism. In an interview on the public broadcaster ARD's *Morgenmagazin* show, Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer called for a major increase in military spending in spite of the coronavirus pandemic. The media is stepping up its propaganda for militarism and war, and representatives of all parliamentary parties released official statements declaring their full support for the army.

In his speech to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the Bundeswehr's founding, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier sought to cover up the militarist roots and war-like character of the army, and portray it as a guarantor of freedom, democracy and peace. But his claim that the Bundeswehr has nothing to do with "the unwholesome role of German militarism" and the criminal record of the Wehrmacht is just as dishonest today as it was 65 years ago.

At its founding on November 12, 1955, the Bundeswehr was called New Wehrmacht, and for good reason. It was only renamed in 1956. All of the 44 generals and admirals sworn in by 1957 came from Hitler's Wehrmacht, above all from the general staff of the army. Of the 14,900 professional soldiers who made up the officers corps in 1959, there were 12,360 Wehrmacht officers, 300 of whom came from the leadership of the SS.

The ruling class attempted for an extended period to conceal this continuity. However, ever since the federal government announced the end of military restraint at the Munich Security Conference in 2014, the grizzly traditions of the German ruling elite and its military

have emerged ever more clearly. As was the case during the German Empire and under the Nazis, the military is to be made the centrepiece of society and the Bundeswehr transformed into a war machine capable of defending German imperialist interests around the world.

Steinmeier's speech left no doubt about this. The Bundeswehr "expresses our will to defend ourselves and is an important instrument in our ability to do so," Steinmeier declared. "Despite all the changes over the past decades, the Bundeswehr will remain essential for our country in the future." He proceeded to explain what he meant by this: war abroad and major military deployments domestically.

"Never before has the Bundeswehr had to shoulder such wide-ranging responsibility in the form of solidarity with our allies in Central and Eastern Europe, overseas deployments from the Balkans to Afghanistan and Mali and from Iraq to the Indian Ocean, and defence, including in cyberspace, and support in national crises, as is the case now in the pandemic," stated Steinmeier.

Steinmeier already played a central role in reviving German militarism as foreign minister. At the 2014 Munich Security Conference, he remarked that Germany is too large and too strong economically merely to "comment on world politics from the sidelines." He now considers it his task to push ahead with the drive to war and impose this policy against the widespread opposition among the population.

"[E]ven under President Biden, Europe will not be as important to the US as it used to be," added Steinmeier. "With regard to security policy, I see our country as having a dual responsibility." He meant by this the

development of an independent great power policy for Europe under German leadership, and a stronger role for Berlin within NATO. “For Germany, the development of an EU capable of taking action in defence policy is as pressing as the expansion of the European pillar of NATO,” continued Steinmeier. Germany must “do everything to make Europe strong.”

To finance these policies, the grand coalition plans to hike the military budget, which was already increased last year by 10 percent. “This will cost more,” Steinmeier acknowledged. Soldiers “have a right to be equipped with the best possible kit this country can provide them, equipment that provides them with the best possible protection and enables them to fulfil the mission defined by the political sphere.”

The mission is essentially the same as it was under the German emperor and the Nazi dictatorship: the military enforcement of the economic and geostrategic interests of German imperialism around the world. The propaganda to justify this runs thus: “We need the Bundeswehr because Germany must assume responsibility for its own security, because we have taken on responsibility for our neighbours and allies, just as they take on responsibility for our security; because the world around us is changing, and not always in the way we would like ...”

The ruling class is well aware that after two catastrophic world wars during the last century, the return of militarism and war is widely opposed by the population. “War, combat, courage, injuries, trauma, death, armed Germans, let alone Germans fighting in other countries—these are topics we prefer to sweep under the carpet. We do not like to talk about these things, and when we do, it is usually to express criticism,” complained Steinmeier, before adding threateningly of “a mutual lack of comprehension between soldiers and society. We cannot simply accept this state of affairs.”

Steinmeier and the ruling class are demanding that the entire population identify with militarism. The experiences of “soldiers who ... served in combat, where they were wounded physically or psychologically ... form part of our experiences. Their battles are our battles, even if indeed because peace prevails here in Germany,” stated Steinmeier. “This is not merely something we can expect of our society. It should also be important to our society. Society owes you this

empathy and interest.”

The implications of this are clear. As on the eve of World War I and World War II, all opposition to war should be criminalised. Instead, the cult of soldiers and heroes should be revived. Steinmeier recalled how he participated as foreign minister in 2007 in a ceremony to honour three German soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan. “I never met any of these three men,” he said. “But I stood before their coffins in Kunduz, where two of their comrades stood guard of honour. ... It is the duty of us all to remember them with respect and gratitude.”

Steinmeier’s speech is a warning. He may distance himself in words from the Wehrmacht and the Nazis. However, the content of what he says and does shows that the ruling elite stands in these very same traditions and is responding to the deepening crisis of capitalism and mounting opposition from the working class by turning to militarism and fascism, just as it did during the 1930s.

Already after the entry of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) into parliament in September 2017, Steinmeier used his speech to mark German Unity Day to promote political cooperation with the right-wing extremists. Then, in late November 2017, he invited the leaders of the AfD at the time, Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel, to Bellevue Palace for talks. The militarisation and drive to war he has now proclaimed at the same location will further strengthen the fascist forces, including those within the Bundeswehr, not weaken them.



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