

German militarism and the war in Afghanistan

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On Wednesday, the last German soldiers flew out of Afghanistan. This marked the end of the biggest and longest deployment of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) to date.

At 20 years, it lasted more than three times as long as the Second World War. More than 150,000 German military personnel experienced their first war deployment. Fifty-nine died, thousands more were injured and traumatised. The military costs alone amounted to 12 billion euros.

In its final phase, the withdrawal resembled a desperate scramble. It came after US forces began withdrawing the bulk of their troops well before the 11 September deadline set by President Biden. The last German transport planes left Camp Marmal, their transponders switched off for fear of being shot down by the Taliban.

Observers expect the fundamentalist Islamist movement, which was ousted from power at the beginning of the war, to retake the nearby city of Mazar-e-Sharif and large parts of the country in the coming weeks. This has led to numerous German media outlets writing about a “failed mission” and a “defeat of the West.” But this is only half the truth.

For one thing, the war in Afghanistan is far from over with the official withdrawal of NATO troops. Neither Washington nor Berlin is willing to let Iran, Russia, China or any other rival exert influence over the strategically important country.

Military “advisors” and private mercenaries will stay behind. Regional allies of the “West”—Turkey, but also Pakistan, the Taliban’s protecting power—will be encouraged to keep the conflict simmering. US drones and aircraft will bomb the country, as has long been the case with other countries with which the US is not formally in a state of war (Yemen, Iraq, Syria).

German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer has announced, “When we leave the country militarily, we must continue to stay by Afghanistan’s side, for example by talking within NATO about how we can continue to support the Afghan army.”

Washington and Berlin did not succeed in installing a stable puppet regime in Kabul, as they had originally intended. But from the German point of view, the war served a far more important purpose: it paved the way for the return of German militarism, hated by broad sections of the population after the crimes of Hitler’s Wehrmacht in the Second World War. For the ruling class, this was more than worth the high human and financial sacrifice.

In 2001, the government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD) and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) had literally forced German participation in the war on the US government. At a press conference, then-US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld later confirmed that Berlin had never been asked to provide soldiers, as the German government had claimed.

President George W. Bush used the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 to implement war plans against Afghanistan that had long been worked out. As the WSWS warned just a few days after the attacks:

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have been seized on as an opportunity to implement a far-reaching political agenda for which the most right-wing elements in the ruling elite have been clamoring for years...

Can there be any doubt that this crusade for “peace” and “stability” will become the occasion for the US to tighten its grip over the oil and natural gas resources of the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian? Behind the pious and patriotic declarations of politicians and media commentators stand the long-cherished designs of American imperialism to dominate new parts of the world and establish global hegemony.

German imperialism did not want to be left out of this war for the revision of the world. On 11 October 2001, four days after the start of American hostilities in Afghanistan, Chancellor Schröder announced a fundamental reorientation of German foreign policy to the Bundestag (federal parliament).

“After the end of the Cold War, the restoration of Germany’s state unity and the regaining of our full sovereignty, we have to face international responsibility in a new way,” he declared. “A responsibility that corresponds to our role as an important European and transatlantic partner, but also as a strong democracy and strong national economy in the heart of Europe.”

The period in which Germany had participated in “international efforts to secure freedom, justice and stability” only through “secondary assistance” was “irretrievably over,” the chancellor stressed. “We Germans in particular... now also have an obligation to do full justice to our new responsibility. That also includes—and I say this quite unequivocally—explicitly participating in military operations.”

One month later, the Bundestag decided to provide 3,900 Bundeswehr soldiers for the fight “against international terrorism.” Schröder linked the vote to a vote of confidence—a highly unusual procedure, especially since, due to the support of the CDU/CSU and FDP, a majority would have been guaranteed even should there be defections from within his own camp. But Schröder wanted to make sure that the SPD and the Greens would vote unanimously in favour of Germany’s largest military deployment since the Second World War. Foreign Minister Fischer threatened to resign if the Green parliamentary group turned against the Afghanistan mission.

The threats proved to be superfluous. An SPD party conference three days later approved the war policy by a 90 percent vote. At the federal party conference of the Greens, more than two-thirds of the delegates backed the decision to go to war.

Since then, more than 150,000 servicemen and women have received their baptism of fire in Afghanistan. They had to learn to risk their lives and kill in the interests of German imperialism. The statement by Defence Minister Peter Struck (SPD) at the beginning of the war that the “security

of the Federal Republic of Germany” was being defended in the Hindu Kush summed this up.

In addition, it was necessary to accustom the public to the fact that German soldiers were killing again. The outcome was the Kunduz massacre.

On the night of 4 September 2009, Bundeswehr Colonel Georg Klein, in consultation with his superiors in Potsdam, gave the order to bomb a hijacked tanker truck filled with petrol. Although the truck was stuck in a riverbed and posed no danger, Klein refused the American pilots’ request that they be allowed to warn the many people around the truck of the attack. As a result, over 130 civilians, including many children and young people, met their deaths in a hail of bombs and the ensuing conflagration.

Neither Klein nor any other officers were prosecuted for the massacre. The Office of the Attorney General closed all investigations in 2010. In 2013, Klein was promoted to brigadier general and head of the department in personnel management, responsible for recruiting and leading soldiers. The relatives of the victims were fobbed off by the federal government with pittances of 5,000 euros. Lawsuits were rejected by the courts.

Militarism at home, which played such a devastating role in the Weimar Republic in the 1920s and 30s, was strengthened by the Afghanistan war. Soldiers became a commonplace sight on the streets. They were allowed to travel by train for free if they wore their uniforms. This was expanded to the development of a cult of sacrifice and the establishment of fascist and terrorist networks within the military.

The conservative press is even trying once again to create a kind of “stab-in-the-back” legend, following the example of the myth promoted by Hitler about the “traitorous” Weimar Republic. The tabloid *Bild*, for example, was outraged that Federal President Steinmeier, Bundestag President Schäuble, Chancellor Merkel and Defence Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer did not personally stand guard when the last soldiers returned from Afghanistan. This was “disrespectful, undignified, disrespectful.”

While hundreds of Afghan translators and civilian staff of the German troops were left behind, and now fear for their lives, at great expense the Bundeswehr flew out a 27-ton memorial stone for the fallen soldiers, which is now being rebuilt in a “forest of remembrance” at the Henning-von-Tresckow barracks in Schwielowsee. This was “an important step for the culture of remembrance of the armed forces,” commented an officer in charge.

Most significant of all, the extensive right-wing terrorist networks within the military and state apparatus are inextricably linked to the Afghanistan mission. For example, Sergeant Major André S., alias Hannibal, was a member for eight years of the Special Forces Command (KSK), which operated largely covertly in Afghanistan, hunting down and killing political opponents together with American Special Forces troops and itself suffering heavy casualties.

Hannibal, who also worked for the Military Counter-Intelligence Service, built up a nationwide network through several online chat groups and the association he founded, Uniter, which included reservists, officers of the criminal police, members of special operations units (SEKs), judges, secret service employees and members of other German security agencies. It set up weapons caches, organised shooting exercises, and drew up lists of political enemies to be killed on “Day X.” Despite this, Hannibal was neither dismissed from the Bundeswehr nor imprisoned.

Hannibal is only one of several known right-wing extremists within the KSK. The Nazi cult within the special unit took on such serious forms that in 2020 the defence minister felt compelled to dissolve one of four companies and replace the commander twice. Now, the unit is led by General Ansgar Meyer, who was the last German soldier to leave Afghanistan.

All the establishment political parties are determined to build on what has been achieved in Afghanistan. In 2014, the Grand Coalition of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats made another attempt to

strengthen German militarism. Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who, as head of the Chancellery, had presumably written Schröder’s war speech in 2001, announced in almost the same words a greater military role for Germany in world politics. Since then, military spending has risen massively—from 32 to 50 billion euros—and Steinmeier has become federal president.

If the establishment parties have learned a lesson from the Afghanistan deployment, it is that imperialist military missions should no longer be concealed with hypocritical phrases about drilling wells, building democracy and women’s rights.

On Wednesday’s “Tagesthemen” news broadcast, Defence Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer drew the lesson from the Afghanistan mission that in other international missions it was necessary to think very carefully about what were realistic political goals. It had been a mistake to give the impression that Afghanistan could quickly be turned into a state following the European model. “We must not repeat this mistake in other international missions, for example in the Sahel, for example in Mali.”

The federal government that follows this year’s general election—regardless of its composition—will intensify the militarist offensive. All parties—from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the Greens—have made this clear in their election programmes. Even the Left Party has repeatedly declared that its occasional critical phrases about the Bundeswehr are no obstacle to forming a joint government with the parties of war—the SPD and the Greens.

Their defence policy spokesman, Tobias Pflüger, commented on the Afghanistan withdrawal by saying, “If you read through the justifications given by Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer in 2001, it is obvious that the Bundeswehr missions have not achieved their alleged goal.”

As if it was not already clear at that time what goal Schröder and Fischer were pursuing with the Afghanistan war.

Ultimately, it is the insoluble global crisis of capitalism that is driving the imperialist powers once again to militarism and war, as in 1914 and 1939. The US is intensively preparing a military confrontation with China, and neither Germany nor the other European powers want to stand aside.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) is the only party standing in the Bundestag elections to present a programme that combines the struggle against militarism and war with a socialist perspective. It advocates the mobilisation of the international working class for the overthrow of capitalism.



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