

In the footsteps of the Wehrmacht: German ruling elite organises “Zapfenstreich” march to commemorate Afghanistan debacle

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14 October 2021

The lesson drawn by the ruling class from the neo-colonial plundering of Afghanistan is: even more rearmament and war! The militaristic spectacle in the German capital on Wednesday left no doubt about that.

The political and military elites spent almost the entire day publicly paying tribute to the German army’s (Bundeswehr) 20 years of service and glorifying war, combat and soldierhood as if the German crimes in two world wars never occurred.

The official program began in the early afternoon with a wreath-laying ceremony at the Bundeswehr memorial in the Bendlerblock complex of the Ministry of Defence. In the afternoon, the “central closing roll call at the end of the Afghanistan mission” was held, followed by speeches by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democrats) and Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (Christian Democrats). The “highlight” was a torchlight parade at Republic Square in the evening.

The scenery was eerie and reminiscent of the darkest times in German history. Hundreds of armed soldiers with steel helmets and torches marched in front of the spacious, cordoned off Reichstag building to celebrate the Grand “Zapfenstreich,” or grand tattoo, the most important ceremonial act executed by the German federal armed forces. Further torchbearers, the so-called “pearl necklaces,” lined the stairs of the Reichstag building. Military orders and military music rang out through the night.

No military ceremony could make the tradition of the German army and its war missions clearer. The Grand “Zapfenstreich”—replete with torches and the playing of “Taps”—has its roots in Prussian militarism. It was celebrated in the Prussian army, the German army of the German Empire and the Reichswehr of the Weimar Republic before it reached its climax in the Wehrmacht of the Third Reich. Today, it is being used to further promote the return of German militarism.

The spectacle was followed by all major media outlets and

broadcast live on the ARD public television channel in prime time. Commentators explained changes that had been made to the organization of the Zapfenstreich. On the pedestal in front of which the soldiers marched, there were not, as usual, high-ranking state representatives or retiring generals, but two soldiers who were supposed to represent the more than 90,000 German soldiers who served in Afghanistan.

The message was clear and was repeated like a mantra: German soldiers fight and fall for their country and must therefore be “appreciated” and “honoured” by society.

In fact, German troops waged a bloody imperialist war in the resource-rich and geo-strategically important country from the start. The operation not only had fatal consequences for the German army (59 soldiers dead in total) but above all for the local civilian population, which was not even mentioned in the official propaganda.

On the contrary, the same politicians and military personnel who are responsible for the crimes and debacle in Afghanistan are going on the offensive and demanding an even higher number of casualties in future conflicts.

“How far are we really ready to go to strengthen, protect and defend our values and achievements? With what means and accepting what costs and sacrifices?” asked Kramp-Karrenbauer in her speech. Then she added menacingly, “We have to answer this question. The answers to that are the best memories we can have of those who were left behind on this mission.”

She went on to plead for militarization to be pushed further, both at home and abroad, remarking, “Afghanistan must continue to change us.” It was necessary “to equip those who are now deployed even better, and those who will be deployed in the future, to prepare them even better.” It is important to “better answer the question of the association between politics and the army” and also “to keep the operations alive at the heart [of society], not to push them away, not to give the feeling to those who are willing to put

their necks on the line as if they are to blame and nobody in Germany cares about them.”

Steinmeier, who as foreign minister played a key role in the return of German militarism, made a similar statement. He assured the army that the next federal government would accelerate and escalate Germany’s return to an aggressive foreign and great power policy. “Soldiers: Germany deserves a security policy that draws lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan. This is a task that extends well beyond these weeks—it is a task for a new federal government and the new federal parliament, which will be constituted this month,” he declared.

The “fall of Kabul” is a turning point that is forcing Germany to “rethink our responsibility in the world, our possibilities and its limits in a new and self-critical manner,” the head of state added. However, “resignation and withdrawal” would be “the wrong lesson,” he declared. After all, Germany is not an “island” but has, as “the most populous country in the European Union and the fourth largest economy in the world, ... weight in this world.”

The message could not be clearer. The “correct lesson” from Afghanistan is to enforce the imperialist interests of Germany more effectively in the future. “We have to expand our capabilities and better network our instruments—diplomatically, militarily, civilly, humanitarian, development and economic policy,” explained Steinmeier. “And we have to become stronger in our capabilities, also in the military.” It is “right” that Germany “in these unstable times ... invests more in its defence.” The Bundeswehr requires “good equipment and functioning structures because our country needs a functioning Bundeswehr,” he stated.

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In a well-worn cynical manner, Steinmeier tried to sell the call for rearmament and great power politics as an answer to the Nazi crimes in World War II. “Yes, we know about the heavy burden of our history—and nobody knows it better than the soldiers of the Bundeswehr,” he said. “Knowing about places like Babyn Yar” — the site of massacres in Ukraine carried out by Nazi forces during its campaign against the Soviet Union—and “about events there and in other places, especially in Eastern Europe, reminds us: The Wehrmacht under the Nazis did not establish any tradition that we can refer to.”

Steinmeier and the ruling class have a problem. It is now evident that the German elites are drawing on their fascistic traditions and reacting to the deep crisis of capitalism and the explosive conflicts between the great powers with militarism, war and fascism as they did in the 1930s. This is underscored not only by the Berlin commemoration and the

war speeches by Steinmeier and Kramp-Karrenbauer but also by the entire foreign and domestic political developments in recent years.

As foreign minister, Steinmeier made an open pact with fascist forces in Ukraine as early as 2014. During the putsch in Ukraine, which was supported by Berlin, he received Oleg Tyagnybok, the leader of the fascist Svoboda party, which until then had mainly acted as an ally of Germany’s neo-Nazi NPD, at the German embassy in Kiev. Tyagnybok refers positively to Nazi collaborators who were involved in the mass murder of thousands of Ukrainian Jews, including in the Babyn Yar massacre.

In Germany, the established parties made the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) the official opposition party in parliament, integrated the right-wing extremists into the political system and systematically pursued their agenda. This is currently shown by the essentially fascist “Profits before Life” policy in response to the pandemic, which has already cost the lives of more than 94,000 people in Germany alone.

At the same time, right-wing terror networks operate largely unmolested in the police, secret services and the army. Just a few days ago, right-wing extremist networks in the guard battalion that provided troops for the Zapfenstreich formation on Wednesday became known.

All these developments and pictures of German soldiers marching in the middle of Berlin with weapons and torches have further fuelled the deeply rooted opposition to militarism and fascism among the population. Outrage erupted on social media over the event. Users repeatedly drew parallels to the Third Reich and castigated German militarism.

This opposition needs clear political leadership and perspective. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party) fights for the building of an anti-war movement of the German and international working class, which aims to abolish the root of war and fascism—capitalism—and to replace it with a global socialist society.



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