

“Show strength again” and “lead”: the German Bundeswehr advertises for World War Three

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Early last week, the Bundeswehr (German armed forces) launched a “cross-media image campaign.” Like earlier media campaigns, it glorifies militarism and nationalism, but this time aims even more openly to prepare the public for a new world war and to recruit the necessary cannon fodder.

The campaign’s martial motifs and videos call for a “borderless” defense of Germany’s “freedom” and participation in a “show of force” to build a “strong Bundeswehr.” Emblazoned above a picture of a tank commander is the slogan: “What counts when we have to show strength again?”

The propaganda offensive is of a massive scale. According to the Defense Ministry’s press release: “In order to reach citizens across Germany, the campaign will be played out nationally—on analog and digital poster motifs, at a wide range of touchpoints and on giant posters in strategically important locations throughout Germany.” In addition, there will be ads “on social media and relevant websites.” A YouTube video of the campaign glorifies the deployment of fighter pilots, Marine special forces, warships and armored infantry advancing east.

The Bundeswehr is notorious for campaigns that trivialize the crimes of German imperialism and target young people. In September 2018, it advertised under the tagline #Führen (English: to lead) with the face of submarine commander Nana Ehlers, who now hosts regular Bundeswehr programs on YouTube. In late 2019, a photo of a Wehrmacht uniform with four swastikas appeared on the Bundeswehr’s Instagram account, tagged “retro.”

Every year, the Bundeswehr is prominently represented at Gamescom, the world’s largest trade fair for computer and video games. In 2022, the armed forces tried to recruit cyber specialists, as well as combat and drone

pilots, with slogans like “Multiplayer at its best” and “It doesn’t get more ‘open world’ than this.”

Since the start of the Ukraine war, the German Armed Forces YouTube channel has launched several new formats in which generals and weapons specialists spread war propaganda and discuss the events of the war on an almost daily basis. Unlike many critical YouTube formats, Bundeswehr content is extensively promoted and monetized by the platform. Typical videos receive tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of views. By comparison, official US Air Force and US Army videos on YouTube are typically viewed 10 times fewer.

Brigadier General Christian Freuding, who has appeared seven times in the “Nachgefragt” video format since the start of the Russian invasion and heads the “Ukraine Special Staff” in the Ministry of Defense, has since been promoted to head the planning staff of Defense Minister Boris Pistorius (Social Democrats, SPD). Freuding analyzes the tank battles in eastern Ukraine with the cold precision of a war-tested German general. He began his career as a company commander in the NATO protection force for Bosnia and Herzegovina before becoming the Bundeswehr chief of staff in Afghanistan in 2007.

The Bundeswehr’s media campaigns primarily pursue the goal of attracting young people to volunteer for armed service. They have long focused on portraying the Bundeswehr as an adventure or—in times of mass layoffs in industry and falling real wages—as an “attractive employer.”

But although the military’s “marketing measures” are “well done and tailored to the target group,” according to a communications consultant quoted by the reservist association, and although for years the Bundeswehr has been sending “youth officers” to schools to indoctrinate minors with war propaganda, it has yet to achieve the

desired results.

According to the reservist association, “fewer and fewer people are applying to join the Bundeswehr.” Last year there were “only 43,900 people ... 20 percent less than in the 2010s.” This indicates a “massive personnel problem,” since “for the fight on the eastern flank” a division of 10,000 to 30,000 soldiers must be “cold-start ready” by 2025.

The Bundeswehr’s “manpower problem” is the result of deep-rooted opposition to war and militarism among the population. Most young people know that the Bundeswehr is not fighting for “freedom” and “democracy,” but is trampling on both values in order to assert the profit interests of Volkswagen, Siemens, BASF and Co. on the world stage.

This is especially true of the war in Ukraine. As the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations reported at the end of February, the war has led to “record results in trade with the East,” which was reflected in “double-digit export increases” in trade with Central and Eastern Europe.

The last times the German military “showed strength”—in World War I and World War II—the lives of millions of young men were senselessly sacrificed to the interests of Flick, Krupp, Siemens, IG Farben and Deutsche Bank.

The Reichswehr and the Wehrmacht—the German military of those eras—spread misery and terror. German soldiers roamed Europe pillaging, burning villages and murdering millions of civilians. The army played a central role in Hitler’s war of extermination, which aimed to conquer Europe, enslave the people of Eastern Europe, and destroy European Jewry. Ultimately, the horrors of the war washed back upon Germany.

The Bundeswehr embodies the continuity of German militarism. Ten years after government representatives proclaimed that Germany must once again play an international role in military and power politics commensurate with its economic strength, the government is using the Ukraine war to put these great power ambitions and rearmament plans into practice.

Immediately after the Russian invasion began, Chancellor Olaf Scholz—to the enthusiastic applause of the Bundestag (German parliament)—proclaimed a long-prepared “Zeitwende” (change of times) and announced the largest military buildup since Hitler, which has been steadily accelerating ever since. In the past month alone, plans became public to triple the original “special assets for the Bundeswehr” to 300 billion euro and to quintuple

the volume of German arms deliveries to the Ukrainian military.

Having completed the integration of the Dutch army with the Bundeswehr in March, plans for a German-led European missile defense are now being pushed forward. The stated goal of the ruling class is to defeat the Russian army in Ukraine and end US military supremacy in Europe.

Although its official tradition decree states that the Wehrmacht is “not worthy of tradition as an institution,” the Bundeswehr has never broken with these traditions. Wehrmacht generals are the namesakes of barracks and role models for soldiers and officers. The cultivation of Wehrmacht and SS traditions is particularly well documented in elite German units such as the Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK) or the paratroopers. In the Ukraine war, the German military is working with units that invoke the legacy of Ukrainian Nazi collaborators in World War II and venerate mass murderers like Stepan Bandera.

When the Bundeswehr now once again courts new recruits with authoritarian slogans like “Show Strength” and “#Lead,” it is openly appealing to the most right-wing elements in society. Neo-Nazis, Alternative for Germany (AfD) party supporters and other right-wingers will be attracted to it.

At the same time, it is driving the militarization of the whole society. For example, the website “karrierekaserne” advertises that “civilian and military tasks must go hand in hand” in order to “protect our country and our allies.” As before the First and Second World Wars, social life is to be subordinated to the military requirements of a Europe-wide war.

Significantly, on the day of the Bundeswehr’s campaign launch, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen—herself a former German defense minister—announced a plan for a European “war economy” that would increase the production of heavy munitions to “one million rounds per year.”



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