

German education minister wants to make universities fit for war

Christopher Lehmann
10 March 2024

As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, this year's Munich Security Conference exacerbated ongoing wars and geopolitical tensions. It included discussions on the need to place research and teaching at universities even more strongly at the service of German militarism. In addition to ideological preparation for war, the focus is increasingly to be placed on concrete weapons development. To this end, the so-called "civilian clause"—the ban on military research at universities—is to be abolished.

At the "Conversation on Research Security" panel discussion on February 16, Federal Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger (Free Democratic Party, FDP) emphasised two points: Research was a geopolitical factor and therefore relevant to security, and the strong wall between "civilian and military research" had to be broken down.

New technologies created new economic dependencies, and states demonstrated their power through them, Stark-Watzinger declared.

Pointing to developments in Israel and the US, and the general wave of rearmament, she concluded that militarism and ideological warfare had to be brought back into the universities.

The education minister ended her speech by citing the European Union's "Open Science" principle: "As open as possible, as closed as necessary."

Since the Munich Conference, Stark-Watzinger has outlined the government's views in more detail in a number of interviews.

"As federal research minister, I would like to encourage greater cooperation between civilian and military research in suitable areas," she told the DPA press agency. She continued:

This is about leveraging synergies and strengthening our innovative power. Other valued partners such as Israel and the US are successfully showing us how to do this. We can no longer do without them. In any case, the boundaries between civilian and military research are becoming increasingly blurred as technology advances.

The "valued partners" Israel and the US, which are currently committing genocide against the Palestinian population in Gaza, with Germany's support, were not chosen as role models by chance. According to a report by the government's Expert Commission on Research and Innovation (EFI) for 2023 and 2024, Germany should model itself on the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and the Israeli military's Unit 8200.

DARPA was founded in 1958 in response to the "Sputnik shock," when the USSR became the first nation to put a satellite into space.

Equipped with an annual budget of \$4.1 billion, it serves to develop new high-risk and cost-intensive military technologies. This amounts to approximately €3.7 billion, which is almost three times the current German federal budget for environmental protection and nature conservation.

The Israeli military's Unit 8200 is considered a central factor in the IT sector in Israel, as many ex-soldiers work in the civilian tech sector. The unit is trained in the fields of "information and communication technologies, computer science and cyber security," and is primarily active in secret military operations, e.g., counterintelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance, cyber warfare and code decryption.

The German government has plans to establish and expand such projects.

The EFI report particularly praises the Agency for Innovation in Cybersecurity, founded in 2020. Based in Halle (Saxony-Anhalt), it already violates the separation of civilian and military research. The Expert Commission is calling on the federal government to expand the agency's scope.

The Bundeswehr (armed forces) €100 billion "special fund" is to provide resources for the areas of cyber security and artificial intelligence (AI). Under the guise of "digital transformation," this is intended to strengthen German imperialism.

With China and the US at the head of international rankings in the field of AI development, the EFI warns that Germany and Europe are becoming "unilaterally dependent," and can no longer be "sovereign" in terms of technology. In the EFI Report 2023, which served as the basis for the discussions at the Munich Security Conference, numerous anti-Chinese measures were proposed, following on from the China strategy published last year by the coalition government.

The EU is to serve as an instrument for Germany to improve its technological expertise. Key technologies as well as standardisation activities are to be developed in cooperation with EU partners.

In order to prevent a so-called "knowledge drain" to China, high requirements are being demanded for joint projects with Chinese players, and even the establishment of a separate "China Competence Centre" for German-Chinese cooperation.

The "civilian clause" has long been a thorn in the side of the ruling class, and especially now given its monstrous rearmament plans. As before the First and Second World Wars, universities are once again to become centres of militarism.

The "civilian clause" is a self-imposed obligation to conduct research at German universities for peaceful purposes only. This excludes, among other things, the acceptance of third-party funding from the armaments industry.

As a reaction to the Cold War arms race, a “civilian clause” first came into force at the University of Bremen in 1986. Since then, around 70 universities have adopted it. The clause follows the strong conviction of the German population that after the Second World War and the Holocaust, war and mass destruction should never again emanate from German soil.

The EFI, on the other hand, concludes: “The strict separation that has been practised in Germany for decades needs to be fundamentally reconsidered and—where appropriate—abolished.”

It continues:

The Commission of Experts already pointed out in its last report that as a result of this separation, the scarce resources for research and innovation to solve socially important problems, such as securing data networks and critical infrastructure, are not being used efficiently.

This is a cover for clearing the way for the return of German militarism at universities.

In autumn of 2023, Federal Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (Social Democratic Party, SPD) called for Germany to “change its mentality.” For the coalition government of the SPD, FDP and Greens it is not only about the unprecedented military build-up of ammunition and war equipment, but also about calling on the German university landscape to place itself at the service of German imperialism.

As Pistorius declared:

We have to get used to the idea again that there could be a threat of war in Europe, and that means we have to become fit for war, we have to be ready to defend ourselves and prepare the Bundeswehr and society for it.

These developments confirm the warnings of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which has been fighting for over 10 years against the transformation of universities into centres of militarism.

In 2014, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), a central think tank of the German bourgeoisie, in cooperation with the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), published the document “New power—new responsibilities. Elements of a German Foreign and Security Policy for a World in Transition.” On the role of universities, it stated:

A more complex environment with shortened response times also requires better cognitive skills and knowledge. Knowledge, perception, understanding, judgment and strategic foresight: all these skills can be taught and trained. But that requires investments—on the part of the state, but also on the part of universities, research institutions, foundations, and foreign policy institutions. The goal must be to establish an intellectual environment that not only enables and nurtures political creativity, but is also able to develop policy options quickly and in formats that can be operationalised.

Since then, militarist and right-wing ideology has been systematically made socially acceptable at universities. Shortly after the German government announced the end of foreign policy restraint in 2014, professors Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowski began proclaiming far-right, revisionist theses in their lectures at Humboldt University. According to Münkler, Germany must lead as the “taskmaster” in Europe.

This policy requires a relativisation of Nazi crimes. This is because the “most serious vulnerability,” according to Münkler, is “that caused by German history, the reference to the rise of National Socialism [Nazism], together with its racial ideology, the policy of extortion and annexations pursued by Hitler after 1938, the wars of aggression after September 1939, the crimes of the Wehrmacht, especially in the war against the Soviet Union, and finally the murder of the European Jews.”

While Münkler tried to play down Germany’s role in the First World War, Baberowski’s task was to justify and relativise the worst crimes in the history of mankind, carried out by the fascist Nazi regime—the Holocaust and the war of extermination against the Soviet Union. This culminated at the time in the infamous report in the leading news weekly *Der Spiegel*, titled “World War Guilt: Culpability Question Divides Historians Today,” in which Baberowski asserted that Hitler “was not vicious.”

When the IYSSE criticised this falsification of history, it was savagely attacked by the university administration, as well as representatives of all the establishment parties and most of the media, but it gained great support among students and workers.

Now the universities are to be converted to war not only ideologically, but also practically. Although the “civilian clause” has long been circumvented and military cooperation with universities has been carried out, the new plans go far beyond this. If the government has its way, universities will operate not as institutions that impart education and knowledge, but rather to make Germany “fit for war.”

The IYSSE is calling on all students to prevent this from taking place. The only way to stop the madness of a world war and its preparation at universities is to mobilise the working class against capitalism on the basis of an international socialist programme. Students must fight for this orientation and perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact