

German army declares itself rooted in the “traditions” of Hitler’s Wehrmacht

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Last month, the German army published a document asserting that it bases itself on the tradition of the Wehrmacht, the army of the Nazi regime that massacred and starved tens of millions of civilians during World War II.

Almost unnoticed by the public, on July 12 the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) issued “Supplementary information on the guidelines for understanding and maintaining traditions in the Bundeswehr.” The document was signed by Lieutenant General Kai Rohrschneider, head of the Department for Operational Readiness and Support of the Armed Forces in the Defence Ministry. It explicitly names top officers of the Nazi Wehrmacht as “tradition-forming” and “identity-creating” for the Bundeswehr, today’s German army.

This not only exposes the character of the political forces the major NATO powers are setting into motion as they wage war on Russia in Ukraine. It also exposes the arguments of German officials now charged with complicity in genocide over their support for the Israeli war on Gaza. Their bald denials that the German government could have any genocidal intent have no credibility when the government simultaneously rehabilitates the Wehrmacht, the army that played a central role in the Holocaust.

Indeed, the “Supplementary Notes” is unabashed in its glorification of the political criminals in the officer corps of the Nazi regime.

Despite the unspeakable crimes top Nazi officers committed during the Second World War, it hails them as “role models” and “heroes,” as the German ruling class once again prepares to wage war against Russia. Its purpose in so doing, the text states, is to “name examples that create tradition, strengthen identification and, as a result, increase the operational value of units and formations of the respective organisational area.”

It continues:

The turning point triggered by Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, which violates international law, has increased the importance of the war readiness of the armed forces, which is largely derived from a high operational value and high combat effectiveness, also for the cultivation of traditions.

This turns reality on its head. In reality, it was the NATO powers

who deliberately provoked Putin’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine in order to massively rearm Germany and realise long-held war plans. German imperialism, which had already attempted to annex Ukraine and defeat Russia militarily during the First and Second World Wars, is playing a leading role in the war offensive against Russia.

The “Supplementary Notes” makes explicit that the German military believes the promotion of Nazi officers is essential to waging war on Russia today. That is, the promotion of the crimes of German imperialism in the 20th century flows from the crimes it is committing in the 21st. Indeed, the notes declare that “the cultivation of traditions should, among other things, strengthen operational readiness and the will to fight when the mission requires.”

In one remarkable passage, the document explicitly argues that the need for military effectiveness requires valuing military skill over character and ability to function in society. It states that “greater attention must also be paid to military excellence (ability and skill) over other examples of tradition-building such as classic soldierly virtues (character) or achievements for the integration of the armed forces into society.”

What flows from this? If the promotion in the army of Nazi officers who committed genocide and war crimes, including the mass murder of civilians, encourages similarly criminal and antisocial behavior, according to this argument, this is to be accepted as a necessary part of building a ruthless, victorious army.

This essential calculation underlies the promotion of the far-right traditions of the German military. While the first “new traditions decree” passed in 2018 still focused mainly on the experiences of the Bundeswehr’s international war missions since German reunification in 1991, the new “Supplementary Notes” focuses on the *Wehrmacht*.

“In the Bundeswehr’s cultivation of traditions with reference to the new era [in foreign policy], the founding generation of the Bundeswehr has an important role to play in military excellence that is characterised by tradition,” the document states. “The approximately 40,000 former soldiers taken over from the Wehrmacht had largely proven themselves in combat and thus had war experience that was indispensable in the development of the Bundeswehr.”

What did this “experience” consist of? The Wehrmacht was not simply a war army but a central component of the Nazi terror. It

waged a war of extermination against the Soviet Union, which resulted in the deaths of at least 27 million Soviet citizens, and its generals and tens of thousands of officers and soldiers, like the SS and Gestapo, were actively involved in the Holocaust. In total, around 19 million people were killed by the Wehrmacht not in direct combat at the front, but through mass executions or the extermination of entire villages and towns.

In fact, the Bundeswehr was never a blank slate. It was built up by leading Nazi military officers and, significantly, was still called the “New Wehrmacht” when it was officially founded on November 12, 1955. The 44 generals and admirals appointed by 1957 all came from Hitler’s old Wehrmacht, mainly from the Army General Staff. In 1959, there were 12,360 Wehrmacht officers among 14,900 professional soldiers in the officer corps, 300 of whom came from the leadership corps of the SS.

When the Bundeswehr now openly refers to this Nazi legacy as “tradition-building,” this is a serious warning. As in the 1930s, when the ruling class brought Hitler to power in order to make Germany “war ready,” it is now reacting to the deep crisis of capitalism by turning to militarism, fascism and war. And in doing so, it is once again taking up its genocidal traditions.

Here are some of the Nazi military leaders cited as “exemplary” in the “Supplementary Notes”:

General Dr. Karl Schnell (1916-2008): Schnell initially took part in the Western Campaign before being dispatched to the Army Group Centre on the Eastern Front in the summer of 1942 as part of his general staff training. He was then promoted to major (General Staff) with the 3rd Panzergrenadier Division in Italy, which was involved in numerous war crimes. Historians assume that members of the 3rd Armoured Infantry Division killed around 200 civilians in Italy between September 1943 and August 1944. Schnell rose through the ranks in the Bundeswehr to become the second highest in the military brass as deputy inspector general and commander-in-chief of AFCENT in NATO. Between 1977 and 1980, he was state secretary in the Ministry of Defence.

Lieutenant General Hans Röttiger (1896-1960): Röttiger, who had already been a lieutenant in the Prussian Army in the First World War, was appointed chief of the General Staff of the 4th Panzer Army in January 1942 during the campaign of annihilation against the Soviet Union in the Second World War and was promoted to major general shortly afterwards. From July 1943, he served as chief of the General Staff of Army Group A in Russia. After the war, he played a central role in rearmament and was the first to assume the office of Inspector of the Army on September 21, 1957.

Colonel Erich Hartmann (1922-1993): The “Supplementary Notes” celebrate this Wehrmacht officer as “the most successful fighter pilot in military aviation (352 aerial victories).” He was one of only 27 military personnel to receive the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross for his high number of kills. Nazi propaganda regularly celebrated him as a “war hero” in newsreels. At the end of the 1950s, he formed Luftgeschwader 71 “Richthofen,” the first jet fighter squadron of the newly created *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force).

Lieutenant General Gerhard Barkhorn (1919-1983)

and **Lieutenant General Günther Rall** (1918-2009): With Barkhorn and Rall, the Bundeswehr is also celebrating the second and third most successful Wehrmacht fighter pilots after Hartmann. Hitler awarded them both the Knight’s Cross of the Sword for the number of air victories they achieved. After the war, they made stellar careers in the Bundeswehr and NATO. Rall was even inspector of the German Air Force from 1971 to 1974 and was the German representative on the NATO Military Committee in 1974-75.

Rear Admiral Erich Topp (1914-2005): According to the “Supplementary Notes,” Topp was “one of the most successful submarine commanders in the Second World War,” and, it should be added, an avowed Nazi with close connections in the highest Nazi circles. Topp joined the NSDAP (Nazi Party) in May 1933 and the SS in 1934. He had a close relationship with Hitler’s personal secretary and head of the Nazi party chancellery, Martin Bormann. Nevertheless, after the war he rose to become deputy inspector of the Navy and was head of the Plans & Policy Department at NATO Headquarters Northern Europe in Norway.

The open homage to these leading Nazi military officers was in preparation for a long time and confirms all the warnings of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP).

In a resolution in September 2014, the SGP declared that “the propaganda of the post-war decades—that Germany had learnt from the monstrous crimes of the Nazis” and “found its way to a peaceful foreign policy... turns out to be a myth.” German imperialism is “once again showing itself as it historically emerged, with all its aggression both internally and externally.”

A few months earlier, the then-German government had announced the return of German militarism at the Munich Security Conference. At the same time, far-right Humboldt University Professor Jörg Baberowski had described Hitler in *Der Spiegel* as “not vicious,” and claimed: “He didn’t want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

In the same interview, Baberowski praised the now-deceased Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte, who justified the Nazi extermination policy as a “comprehensible response” to the Soviet Union in the 1980s “historians’ dispute.”

The SGP warned that this deliberate trivialisation of Hitler and fascism, and the relativisation of the crimes of the Third Reich, would prepare the ground for new wars and new crimes. This is now a reality.

Ten years later, the German ruling class openly celebrates Nazi war criminals as it prepares—in alliance with the other leading imperialist powers—for direct war against Russia, a nuclear-armed power, and supports the genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. This relapse into world war and barbarism must be stopped by building a socialist, anti-war movement of the international working class.



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