

CDU-SPD coalition government agreement aims to further militarize German universities

Rosalie Arlova

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One of the stated goals of the coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and SPD is the militarization of Germany's universities.

"We are committed to removing obstacles that impede dual-use research or civil-military research cooperation, for example," the agreement says in the section on defense policy. In addition, we want to "eliminate the deficit that exists in Germany in the area of strategic security research and advocate its promotion in the sense of a networked understanding of security."

This is intended to further advance the transformation of universities into centers of German militarism. This process, which began with the official announcement of the return of German militarism in 2013/14, has been constantly driven forward, especially in recent years since the start of the war in Ukraine.

In the summer of 2024, the board of directors of Desy (German Electron Synchrotron)—Germany's largest research center for particle physics—announced that they were considering allowing their research to be used for military purposes, signaling a turning point in their science policy. Desy is a research institute that works with elementary particles, founded in 1959 during the Cold War. In 2013, the center adopted the principle that their research should only be used for "civilian and peaceful purposes."

However, after the start of the Ukraine war, outgoing German chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) announced a turning point in history, ushering in a new era (*Zeitenwende*) of rearmament and militarization. And Desy director Helmut Dosch followed suit. The center has ended cooperation with Russian researchers and disallowed contact with Russian colleagues. In 2024, the board of directors started working on a key issues paper that would amend the center's guiding principle to exclude the word "civilian." This would allow research for security purposes, as Dosch sees such research as a means to secure peace.

In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Dosch stated that "to preserve liberal democracy, Germany needs to be able to defend itself from outside threats." While he alleged that he does "not want the center to become a weapons laboratory," he also stated that he cannot rule out that security-related research

connected to weapon systems will be conducted.

A big challenge to the ruling class's rearmament plans has been the civil clauses—voluntary commitments to conduct research solely for civilian and peaceful purposes. Institutions started introducing these clauses during the Cold War as a reaction to the arms race. Presently, around 70 higher education institutions in Germany have voluntarily adopted the clause. Some states have even enshrined it in law. But now, states and institutions like Desy are lifting the clause.

The abolition of civil clauses is part of the growing trend toward militarization. The blueprint for this was provided in 2013, in a position paper by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). In this paper, they argued that 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 operationalized." One of these policy options is the use of military force. Research institutions and universities are explicitly mentioned as part of this intellectual environment. In this way, academic and research institutions are to be put at the service of German militarism.

In March of 2024, the German Ministry of Education and Research published a position paper arguing for reconsidering the "strict divide between civilian and military research." Former Federal Minister of Education and Research Bettina Stark-Watzinger (Free Democratic Party, FDP) also personally called for abolishing the civil clause, arguing that research is integral to German security. Part of her reasoning was that the US and Israel have proven dual-use research—research for both civilian and military purposes—to be successful—two countries that have been enacting genocide in Gaza with Germany's support.

Later in December, the Federal Cabinet adopted the National Security and Defense Strategy (SVI Strategy). This strategy aims to prepare Germany for war. The strategy notes that the current separation between civilian and military research could "prevent spill-over effects and inhibit the emergence of an innovative state-wide ecosystem." Thus, in the strategy the government commits itself to an "open discussion about the civil clauses" with academic and research institutions, in reality preparing to abolish the clauses.

That same year, the Bavarian state parliament passed the “Act on the Promotion of the Bundeswehr in Bavaria,” which forces higher education institutions to cooperate with the military, essentially banning the civil clause. Additionally, the military may recruit in schools. This law was justified by referencing the Ukraine war and the genocide in Gaza and came as a reaction to the student protests against the genocide. The Act represents an infringement on academic freedom and may serve as a blueprint for other German states.

Germany’s leading political parties are the drivers of this militarization. In the run-up to the 2025 German federal election, calls for the abolition of the clause have increased. Already in 2022, Friedrich Merz, Union’s (Christian Democratic Union/ Christian Social Union, CDU/CSU) candidate for chancellor, argued that civil clauses should be lifted. The Union and FDP include repealing civil clauses and increasing military research in their proposed programs.

In Bavaria, the CSU, the Free Voters, and the SPD voted to abolish civil clauses. In Bremen, the CDU is calling for the abolition of civil clauses. In Hesse, the state government (CDU, SPD) promised to support universities in further developing security-related research and to help them review civil clauses. In North Rhine-Westphalia, where some universities voluntarily retained the civil clause despite it being lifted in 2019, the AfD (Alternative for Germany) called on the state government to encourage the abolition of civil clauses. The Green Party’s candidate for chancellor, Robert Habeck, has also stated that the “strict divide between military and civilian use and development should be reconsidered.”

Although the Left Party officially advocates compliance with the civil clauses, it voted in favor of the massive CDU/CSU and SPD rearmament package in the Bundesrat (Federal Council), thereby making it clear where it really stands.

Demands to open civilian research up to military use also comes from international actors. In January of 2024, the EU Commission published a white paper in which they encourage dual-use research programs, i.e., combining research with military and civilian purposes. The EU research program “Horizon Europe” will be opened for dual-use projects. This program also sends funds to non-EU countries like Israel whose universities have ties to its military.

The civil clauses have already been circumvented for a long time. In North Rhine-Westphalia, even before the civil clause was lifted in 2019, universities conducted research for military purposes. Additionally, several universities in Germany have been receiving funds from the US Department of Defense. Although the University of Bremen had voluntarily committed itself to the civil clause, between 2003 and 2011, more than two dozen of its projects included companies connected to the military sector. One of these projects on meteorites was funded by the Pentagon. However, civil clauses are now being attacked directly as the government prepares Germany for war.

At the same time, right-wing ideology has been increasing in

universities for years, from professor Jörg Barberowski stating that Hitler was not vicious, to professor Herfried Münkler downplaying Germany’s role in the First World War.

Moves to abolish the civil clause have been met with disapproval from a wide range of the population. Scientists at Desy have organized as part of “Science4Peace@Desy.” The initiative’s leader physician Hannes Jung argues that “many scientists work at Desy because they don’t want to engage in military research.” Now, these scientists feel that their academic freedom is in danger. Around 300 scientists have signed a petition against lifting the civil clause.

The GEW—the Education and Science Workers’ Union—has come out in support of this petition and against calls to connect research for civilian and military purposes. Coming from the GEW this is merely lip service in order to control and ultimately suppress the opposition. In reality, the GEW, like the entire DGB, supports the new wartime government. The coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD contains “a number of positive approaches,” according to a GEW statement. The government must now “deliver and follow up.”

Above all, opposition among students against the use of their academic institutions for military purposes is growing. At several universities, students have protested in favor of civil clauses. At Humboldt University in Berlin, students held a general assembly in which students voiced their disagreement with the increased militarization. The student parliament also passed a resolution by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calling on the university’s board of directors to prevent the militarization of the university.

Significantly the resolution draws the connection between social cuts and the arms build-up, and calls on students to join forces with the working class. Students, researchers and workers need to band together and fight against militarization and the abolition of civil clauses. The only way to fight these developments and prevent an escalation of current conflicts into a third world war is to mobilize the working class against capitalism. This needs to be done on the basis of an international socialist program.



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