

Rehabilitating Hitler's army, the Wehrmacht: Military historian Sönke Neitzel promotes fascist warriors

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In a recent interview with *Tageszeitung (taz)*, right-wing military historian Sönke Neitzel openly rehabilitates Hitler's Army, the Wehrmacht, and its criminal traditions. Under the headline "As a republic, we need a democratic warrior", Neitzel not only calls for the reintroduction of compulsory military service, but also a return to the "warrior virtues" and military traditions of the Nazis.

Neitzel's interview comes at a time when German imperialism is once again marching eastwards and preparing for an all-out war against the nuclear power Russia. With the deployment of a permanent combat brigade in Lithuania near the Russian border, Berlin has opened a new chapter in German war policy. Eighty years after Hitler's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, German tanks and soldiers are once again being mobilised against Russia. And once again, the propaganda about the alleged "protection" and "defence" of Germany and Europe against the Russian "aggressor" is being used to prepare for a war of aggression.

Neitzel's contribution to this development is ideological. The "de-civilianisation" of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) that he calls for aims to prepare German soldiers and the entire population for new large-scale military offensives—and to make the murderous logic of an aggressive imperialist war policy socially acceptable again. According to Neitzel, soldiers should not only "protect lives" but also "take lives," something which had "long been denied" in Germany.

What Neitzel cynically refers to as the "democratic warrior" is in fact the fascist warrior—who combines a willingness for total subordination to the state with an ideological justification of murder and annihilation. In the *taz*, he puts it quite bluntly: "The task of soldiers is ultimately: fight, kill, die."

He explicitly looks to the greatest killing machine in human history as a role model: Hitler's Wehrmacht. It is not about "copying the content of the Wehrmacht, but about recognising how important soldier cultures are for the cohesion of troops and state," says Neitzel. "The Wehrmacht system" was "relatively clever" in this respect, he claims.

The fact that the "soldier cultures" he praises, which he also refers to as "tribal cultures," were linked to the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and the Holocaust of six million Jews, the greatest crimes in human history, does not bother Neitzel. He says, "As an institution, the Wehrmacht dealt intensively with and understood soldier cultures: I have to convey identity, cohesion and motivation to soldiers. How do I do that? With songs, with uniforms, with honours, with badges that work for soldiers who are in such a fight."

Neitzel's intention is clear: he wants to prepare the Bundeswehr for another war against Russia in the spirit of the Wehrmacht and revive the traditions of the Nazis. "The point is that a republic should also understand how tribal cultures work in order to utilise them to its best advantage," he demands. "To make it concrete: Why does every grimy Panzer operative still know the 1935 *Panzerlied* (a Nazi song popular in the tank corps)? Because it's a song that works for the social reality of armoured troops."

The song contains the verses: "When an enemy army appears in front of us, we go full throttle and go for the enemy!" And: "To die for Germany is our highest honour."

By the "social reality of armoured troops", Neitzel and the ruling class once again mean war against Russia. If the German 45th armoured brigade, which is stationed in Lithuania, "possibly has to fight," then "it won't be 59

coffins coming back like from Afghanistan, but perhaps 2,000,” warns Neitzel.

He is almost exasperated by the fact that the majority of Germans do not have a positive attitude towards war after the terrible crimes committed in two world wars. Hence his call for the reintroduction of conscription. He regrets that Germans think of the Second World War when they think about war: “For Germans, war is genocide and mass murder.”

But it is precisely these traditions that Neitzel wants to return to. He laments the fact that, unlike under the Nazis, the mentality of sacrifice no longer plays a role today: “We talk about values, but not about a willingness to sacrifice and sacrifice as a concept. Zero. Sacrifice played a major role as a concept under National Socialism [Nazism], and of course we don’t talk about that.”

Neitzel not only wants to sacrifice young people for the predatory interests of German imperialism—if necessary, he is prepared to see the entire population consumed by war. Even women and older people should not be exempt from compulsory military service and active participation in combat. “Many older men are fighting in Ukraine. ... The oldest man the Bundeswehr has trained was 71 years old,” he claims provocatively. “And he didn’t sit in the office, he went to the front.”

Neitzel’s interview is no slip-up. For years, he has been involved in a comprehensive campaign aimed at relativising the crimes of German imperialism in order to prepare new ones. Back in 2014, he spoke at the German Historical Museum together with the radical right-wing Humboldt Professor Jörg Baberowski (“Hitler was not vicious”), where the latter openly advocated war crimes such as taking hostages, “burning down villages” and “spreading fear and terror” in order to win wars.

Neitzel also played a leading role in the campaign to rehabilitate German imperialism in the First World War. Like the second infamous and now retired war professor at Humboldt University, Herfried Münkler, he tried to erase the evidence of German responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War assembled by the renown historian Fritz Fischer. Then as now, the aim was to exonerate German militarism of all guilt—to make it capable of acting and waging war again.

The fact that Neitzel’s positions are not on the fringes but at the centre of the politics of the ruling class is demonstrated by his influence on the policies concerning the traditions of the Bundeswehr, his proximity to the Centre for Military History and his involvement in security policy strategy papers. Significantly, last July the

Bundeswehr issued “Supplementary Notes on the Guidelines on the Understanding and Cultivation of Tradition in the Bundeswehr,” which explicitly identify leading generals and officers of the Nazi Wehrmacht as being “tradition-creating” and “identity-creating” for the Bundeswehr.

After a public outcry forced the Bundeswehr leadership to at least officially revoke the “Supplementary Notes,” Neitzel is now going on the offensive again. His initiative is part of the criminal agenda of a ruling class that is determined to become a world power again—with all the consequences. While Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (Social Democrat, SPD) is calling for Germany to become “war-ready” and the Merz government is preparing an arms budget of five percent of GDP, Neitzel and co. are arming themselves ideologically.

The fact that Neitzel’s interview appears in *taz*, the Green Party’s in-house newspaper, speaks volumes about the right-wing turn of the formerly pacifist milieu of the wealthy petty bourgeoisie. Under conditions of war, growing conflicts between the imperialist powers and explosive social polarisation, these layers are now discovering sympathies for Hitler’s Wehrmacht in order to defend their own sinecures and interests both at home and abroad.

As early as 2014, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) warned that the ruling class was relativising its historical crimes in order to repeat them. What is currently unfolding is a deliberate, systematic recourse to the darkest chapters of German history—and their transformation into a current strategy for military dominance in Europe and beyond—a third German grab for world power, to paraphrase the title of Fritz Fischer’s seminal work.

Workers and young people must respond to this madness by building an international socialist anti-war movement. The terrible crimes of the past must not be allowed to serve as a model for new atrocities. The agenda of the ruling class—fascism, militarism, falsification of history and imperialist war policy—must be countered by the working class with its own programme of socialist and revolutionary internationalism.



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