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Scenario (*Szenario*): A documentary normalises German militarism

Max Linhof
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The documentary *Scenario* (*Szenario*) by Berlin-born Marie Wilke, screened in the Forum section at this year's Berlin film festival, documents, in fact, the normalization of German militarism—in a sense that its director did not necessarily intend.

The film follows the activities of the German army (Bundeswehr) at the Altmark military training area in the Colbitz-Letzlinger Heide [heath] in Saxony-Anhalt—a 232-square-kilometer site that ranks among Germany's largest training areas. In the north of the site lies Schnöggersburg, Europe's biggest training center for urban combat: a ghost town of exposed concrete, complete with checkpoints, hotels, a slum, a subway station and a religious building.

Wilke's film shows students on guided tours of the area, along with swearing-in ceremonies, street festivals for the local population and staged press events. The director's camera observes; it does not comment or judge. She observes in the Berlinale press kit: "The film does not attempt to make a statement or construct a narrative. It consists of fragments; the scenes stand on their own. I was interested in what becomes visible in popular vernacular language regarding Germany's relationship to war."

The result is a film that shows the Bundeswehr exactly as it wants to be seen—not because Wilke intended it that way, but because the decision to let the Bundeswehr speak produces precisely this effect.

Scenario was made after the former German chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party) proclaimed a "turning point" for the German army and the state, i.e., preparation once again for war against Russia. The federal government and all the parties represented in the Bundestag are determined to make the German army combat-ready. The biggest obstacle is not equipment or budget—but rather a population which is largely opposed to such a "turn."

A bourgeois politician on a tour of the training area speaks plainly:

> I'd rather see German tanks or Dutch tanks than Russian tanks. We have to once again step out of our comfort zone. There is no security without sacrifices—and we have to convey that to the public. For those who don't want any to do with it: the majority just has to deal with it—and, as for the rest, they will just have to tough it out.

The film creates an unsettling atmosphere. The sheer scale of the "scenario" in Schnöggersburg makes clear that something serious is being prepared here, something with consequences. German capitalism is preparing once again for war. People will die and the entire machinery—exercises, public relations, conscription—is geared toward getting a reluctant population to accept this.

However, since *Scenario* refrains from any criticism or contextualization of what is shown, it also provides a platform for the Bundeswehr. The film makes the army more approachable, appearing as an institution like any other—with its peculiarities, its bureaucracy and its self-declared necessary function as the country's "insurance." The military is shown from its so-called human side.

The Bundeswehr is not presented for what it actually is and what the German military has *always* been–a war machine to enforce the interests of German capitalism and imperialism, if necessary with brutal force, both externally and internally against its own population. This is its history, tens of millions of dead attest to that, and its present social character. Rather, the soldiers are experts, explainers, trainees—people just doing their jobs. The tours of Schnöggersburg feel like city tours through an open-air museum—factual, informative and accessible. That is what's meant to stick in people's minds.

The film does not blatantly promote the Bundeswehr, but rather presents it as a natural, inevitable part of society. Just how much this suits the Bundeswehr is clear from the manner in which the film came about. In a Berlinale interview, Wilke describes how she explained to a press officer her original plans to shoot the film. She "made clear" she was "doing this completely independently" and would "not allow herself to be influenced." The fact that the press officer watched Wilke's earlier films and found them—in his own words—"interesting," shows that he knew exactly what to expect.

In the Berlinale interview, Wilke said she was less interested in an "investigative approach" and more in "self-representation, presentation, or even simulation—where reality sometimes becomes more tangible to me than when I look behind the scenes." Cutting through the double-talk here, in other words, she deliberately lets this utterly reactionary, sinister institution "reveal" itself.

At a time when the Bundeswehr cites the "mindset of the population" as one of its greatest challenges, this is not a neutral decision. According to a Forsa survey from August 2025, only 16 percent of Germans would be willing to defend their country with arms in the event of war. Conscription is met with massive rejection by the majority of 18- to 29-year-olds. Normalization is not a cultural byproduct of the "turning point." It is its prerequisite.

For decades, military swearing-in ceremonies were carried out behind closed doors due to fear of protests. Today, they are once again taking place in public—in the town square, with families and photos of

children. In one scene in the film, a woman places her small child in front of one of the soldiers and takes a photo. The Bundeswehr has returned to the center of society. Anyone familiar with the historical context sees the threat: images like this are reminiscent of the period before 1945—when families had their photos taken before their sons were drafted into the fascist army that reduced Europe to rubble and ashes.

In the film, one sees German civilians running through the grounds posing as refugees and being asked at checkpoints by Bundeswehr soldiers whether they want to find shelter in a nearby village or move on. The film shows military personnel with simulated injuries and shooting exercises in a digital jungle. These are scenes that do not leave war abstract, but instead rehearse it, step by step—always, however, on the fraudulent basis of "self-defence."

But urban combat—penetrating and fighting in foreign cities—is a thoroughly *offensive* capability. As early as 2017, Lt. Gen. Frank Leidenberger said at the handover of Schnöggersburg: "Past missions have taught us that the environment in which we may have to fight is no longer open terrain, but urban space." Another officer also puts it openly during a tour. The religious facility on the training grounds represents something different—church, mosque, synagogue—depending on the mission area. Overseas deployments are explicitly practiced here.

And the Bundeswehr does not train solely for overseas deployments. The history of the German military—from the Freikorps of the Weimar Republic to the Hitler's storm troopers—is also a history of operations against its own population. In Schnöggersburg, the ruling class is also preparing the Bundeswehr for the inevitable revolutionary conflicts in Germany itself.

The fact that the training city is built to European standards—six-story buildings, a government district, embassy buildings, a subway—speaks for itself. Construction on Schnöggersburg began in 2012—long before the war in Ukraine provided a justification for it. The €100-billion [US$-116 billion] special fund for the Bundeswehr agreed by the government, the suspension of the debt brake to finance the latest war credits amounting to one trillion euros and the planned reintroduction of compulsory military service are not reactions to an acute threat, but rather the realization of an agenda worked out behind the scenes long ago to rearm Germany as a major military power.

It is revealing what Wilke herself says about the film's funding history. In one interview, she reports that the project was "unfinanceable" in 2015: "There was no hook and no interest." Now, however, following the official "turning point," funding "came together pretty quickly." Particularly striking is the funding from the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM)—a state that is rearming also promotes the culture intended to pave the way for it.

Scenario does not gloss over the site's Nazi history. Recruits are matter-of-factly instructed by their superiors that Hitler's Wehrmacht established its testing grounds here, that villages were forcibly evacuated. At the same time, the film argues the Wehrmacht is not part of the Bundeswehr's identity. That is the official propaganda lie. And the film fails to ask the question that should follow: What is the significance of the fact that a new training infrastructure has been built on the same ground today by Rheinmetall—the same corporation that supplied the Wehrmacht?

The film's method of simply showing, rather than ever "looking behind the scenes," does not allow the question to emerge. The Bundeswehr has learned to how to teach history without revealing its own connections to it. The film mentions only one historical figure: Frederick the Great, who saw himself as the "first servant of the state." The actual connection between the Nazi Wehrmacht and today's Bundeswehr does not appear—neither as a warning nor as a legacy.

A document from 2024, which the WSWS reported on, could fill the gap. The "Supplementary Notes on the Guidelines for Understanding and Preserving the Traditions of the Bundeswehr" explicitly describes Wehrmacht generals as "tradition-forming." And the latest scandal at Parachute Regiment 26 in Zweibrücken also shows this continuity. The scandal involved far-right networks, anti-Semitic rituals, Nazi symbolism, sexualized violence—over 200 individual offenses, 55 accused, with the leadership apparently informed and remaining silent.

The most critical voice in the entire film does not come from an expert or a journalist, but from an older man at an information booth at a street festival. While the soldier explains to several passersby using a map that conflicts are "complicated" and there is no simple good or evil, the man refuses to accept the falsification:

> For what? For what, actually? For some people who want to exert influence there and profit from it. That's how conflicts started. That's how it was with Adolf. Industry said, 'Go ahead, create the conflict.' Krupp and Thyssen made a fortune off it. That's the interest behind it. It's still the same today.

The soldier points to the map: "So who are the bad guys in this scenario?" The man doesn't answer the question. He sticks to his analysis: the media is making the population believe they are under threat. "People profit from war."

But this scene then fades away. The film continues. The message is: this is merely one opinion among many. Edited together with the xenophobic statements of other passersby, the old man comes across almost like a crackpot.

Marie Wilke made this film with honest curiosity and technical precision. But honest curiosity is no political shield. When Wilke says she had "real images of war in her mind" while filming and wonders "in what context I see them"—then "context" is precisely what is missing from her film.

€100 billion in special funds, additional war credits of up to one trillion euros, €140 million for Schnöggersburg alone, conscription, the German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall as a state partner, the renewed drive of German imperialism toward the East, and the global resurgence of German militarism. A policy rejected by the vast majority of the population, but supported by *all* of the main political parties, who therefore gratefully accept any form of approval or supposedly "neutral" standpoint.