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European Languages	زبانهای اروپائی

4 April 2018

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05.04.2018

The new traditions of Germany's armed forces: Hero memorialisation, militarism and war

Despite Germany's terrible crimes in two world wars, the government is endeavouring to re-establish new militaristic traditions that prepare the Bundeswehr (armed forces) and the population for war.

Last week, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen issued a "Traditionserlass," an edict outlining what traditions underlie service in the military. At the ceremony, she said, "The old *Traditionserlass* [of 1982] did not know anything about the army of [German] unity and the army in action. It knew nothing about the fight against today's terrorist militias, which use brutal violence to construct regimes of terror, hybrid threats, clashes in cyberspace and the information sphere."

One of the focal points of the new edict was therefore that it "places the rich, more than 60-year history of the Bundeswehr at the heart of our culture of remembrance." A Bundeswehr "that has been contributing to international crisis management for a quarter of a century and has proven itself in multinational operations and in tough combat; whose soldiers have repeatedly shown courage, valour and their willingness to stand up for their mission, with even the highest good; which is there for the people of our country when it is needed; which for more than six decades stands for the right and freedom of our country. The Bundeswehr can be immensely proud of this history!"

The defence minister wants to establish a modern form of "hero memorialisation" that glorifies the fallen of the German war effort of the last two decades. On the basis of the new edict, von der Leyen renamed the Emmich Cambrai barracks in Hanover the Hauptfeldwebel-Lagenstein barracks. Thus, for the first time in the history of the

Bundeswehr, a barracks bears the name of a Bundeswehr soldier killed in a foreign operation. Military police sergeant Tobias Lagenstein was killed on May 25, 2011, in an explosive attack on his group in northern Afghanistan.

Von der Leyen's speech reawakens the cult-like veneration of fallen "war heroes" of the Kaiser's Empire and at the time of the Nazis: "Four days ago, I stood in the grove of honour at Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan. We were commemorating our fallen soldiers. At the end of the ceremony, I went once again to the plaque for First Sergeant Tobias Lagenstein with my field commander. It was an impressive, a moving moment to see the plaque in the light of the torches."

The renaming of the barracks was "a strong sign of solidarity, a sign that the bonds of comradeship reach even beyond death. But it is also an expression of the high esteem of the soldierly virtues that Tobias Lagenstein embodied."

According to the edict, such "soldierly virtues" are "bravery, chivalry, decency, loyalty, modesty, comradeship, truthfulness, determination and the conscientious fulfilment of duties, but also examples of military excellence, e.g., outstanding leadership." They could all "find recognition in the Bundeswehr and be used in teaching and training." For the Bundeswehr, however, "only a soldierly self-image that cannot be reduced to professional skills in battle can be meaningful and inspire traditions." After all, the Bundeswehr was "committed to liberal and democratic goals."

Wherever the Bundeswehr is deployed, it fights not for "freedom" and "democracy" but spreads war and terror. This is demonstrated by the mission in Afghanistan, which was recently extended and expanded.

From 2001 to 2014, the Bundeswehr was already involved there in a brutal combat mission as part of the ISAF. A previous "high-point" was the "massacre at Kunduz" on September 4, 2009. On the order of the then Bundeswehr commander at Kunduz, Colonel Georg Klein, air raids on two tankers killed or injured up to 142 people, many of them women and children, according to official NATO figures.

In returning to a belligerent foreign policy, however, the Bundeswehr is not confining itself to the traditions of the recent past but is also explicitly placing itself in the criminal continuity of German militarism. "From all epochs of German (military) history," exemplary "soldierly ethical attitudes and actions, as well as military forms, symbols and traditions could be taken into the traditions of the Bundeswehr," it is said in the edict.

For example, the "varied history" of the "German armed forces until 1918" was a "source of commemorative role models and events of German (military) history and thus worth

preserving." The German armed forces of that era had "developed many progressive and trend-setting procedures, structures and principles, which still have significance today." These included "modern staff work, commanding, leading from the front or the ethos of the general staff."

Like the 1982 *Traditionserlass*, the new version says that while the Third Reich cannot form the basis for "traditions," the "inclusion of individual members of the Wehrmacht [Hitler's army] in the body of traditions of the Bundeswehr" was "in principle possible." The prerequisite for this was "always a detailed consideration of individual cases as well as a careful balancing." This must "take into account the question of personal guilt and make a contribution that serves in an exemplary or meaningful way into the present, such as participation in military resistance to the Nazi regime or special service in the development of the Bundeswehr."

In other words, the generals and officers of Hitler's Wehrmacht, who then built up the Bundeswehr in the 1950s, and those who were or are declared resistance fighters by the military leadership, continue to be explicitly part of the tradition of the Bundeswehr. The defence minister's announcement last spring to cut off all ties to the Wehrmacht was pure hypocrisy. It was due to the anti-militarist sentiments in the population and served to downplay the extent of the then recently exposed neo-Nazi network around the army officer Franco A., who has been **free** since he was released from jail at the end of November 2017.

After the new Christian Democrat-Social Democrat coalition government entered office last month, the defence ministry and the military are again on the offensive. The new *Traditionserlass* permits not only the glorification of individual members of Hitler's Wehrmacht, but relativises its criminal character. The Wehrmacht, "as an institution," could not belong to the "traditional canon" of the Bundeswehr, "because it was the tool of a criminal regime," the text says. "This standard" also applies to the former East Germany's "National People's Army" and therefore also excludes it as a "tradition-setting institution."

The Wehrmacht was not simply a "tool" but an integral part of the Nazi regime of terror. It waged a war of annihilation in Poland, in the Balkans and in the Soviet Union and, like the SS and the Gestapo, its generals and tens of thousands of officers and soldiers were actively involved in the Holocaust. In all, about 10 million people were killed by the Wehrmacht not in the war at the front, but through mass shootings, executions or the extermination of entire villages, cities and regions.

It is no surprise that the drafting process of the edict involved professors who have been rewriting history for some time in order to relativise the crimes of German imperialism. In the third of four “tradition workshops,” Humboldt Professor Herfried Münkler openly addressed which goals were being pursued in the new edict.

The Bundeswehr was now deliberately placing itself in “dangerous situations,” but the “post-heroic society” only took note of this “with surly indifference.” “If it stays that way, we have a permanent problem,” Münkler complained. The edict must therefore also “transport a form of patterns of behaviour, of acceptance into society.” These include, among other things, the valourisation of the “sacrificial” in the “German concept of victimhood.”