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German academics, generals promote military build-up and war

By Johannes Stern

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A high-profile panel discussion in Berlin last week, under the title “Hybrid Wars,” shed light on the debates currently taking place within ruling circles in Germany seventy years after the end of the second world war.

At the very beginning, the director of the Center for Ethical Education in the Armed Forces, Veronika Bock, emphasized that the academy is located “only about three kilometers as the crow flies from the Defense Ministry.” She said that the topics of the evening will “also provide material for discussions at the Landwehr Canal” (i.e., where the defence ministry is situated).

On the panel arguing in favor of a massive build-up of the German armed forces and the intelligence agencies were: Humboldt University Professor Herfried Münkler; General Major Jürgen Weigt, the commander of the Internal Leadership Center of the Armed Forces; Christian Mölling from the pro-government think tank Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP); and media scholar Bernd Zywiets.

The battle cry “hybrid warfare” served as apologetics for militarism. The participants in the discussion understood by this not only supposed foreign policy threats such as the attitude of Russia toward Ukraine and the terror of the Islamic State (IS), but also every form of domestic resistance.

Significantly, the event was moderated by Jochen Bittner from the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. As a former NATO correspondent, Bittner not only enjoys close connections to the military, but was also personally involved in the working out of the strategy paper “New power, new responsibility,” the blueprint for a new German foreign policy.

The statements of Professor Münkler and General Weigt, above all, made it clear that the return of Germany to aggressive great power politics requires—as in the past—the building of a military-police state, and will lead to a war policy incompatible with the most elementary precepts of international law.

After the experiences in Afghanistan and Ukraine, “politics, society and we soldiers have—in the face of great hardship—accepted that wars and conflicts do not stick to rules,” General Weigt asserted. He then insisted: “What we must learn with regard to hybrid warfare is to accept that conflicts and wars establish new rules, and, indeed, not rules that suit us, not rules that please us, but which are very successful.”

The general concluded: “This means that we do not have to consider how we can convince others to abide by the rules again, rather we must ... find a way of coming out of this dilemma in which we are dealing with enemies who know very well that our weakness is actually our strength: law and legislation, morals and ethics.”

The general left open how far he was ready to go in establishing “new rules” in order to become the master of “dilemmas.” As far as the Eastern Europe historian Jörg Baberowski? At a meeting titled “Interventionsmacht Deutschland?” (Germany as intervention force?) at the German Historical Museum, Münkler’s colleague at Humboldt University had declared last autumn that one could not defeat Islamist groupings such as the Taliban or the IS “if one is not ready to take hostages, burn down villages and hang people and spread fear and terror as the terrorists do.”

Weigt argues in a similar vein. In conflicts and wars, it will no longer be a matter of abiding by the rules—for example, international law and the Geneva Convention—but of “accepting” terrorist methods and horrible war crimes. “Law and legislation” are increasingly seen as a “weakness” to be overcome.

Münkler, the provider of buzzwords for German imperialism, said in this regard, “If we look at the history of international terrorism in the past 20 years, the issue was to expand and strengthen the means to respond.” In his usual pompous style, Münkler then queried whether it was not necessary to “broaden our concept of war to a certain extent ... The problem for analysis is no longer the identification of threats ... but the analysis of our own vulnerability.”

Behind the professor’s pretentious obfuscation is the call for a strong police state. Münkler complained, “In Germany we do not have anything like what the gendarmes are for the French or the carabinieri for the Italians... One really has to think that over. One can say that we begin with concepts, but behind the concepts there is naturally an objective problem and it is larger than the concepts.”

The “objective problem” is above all the population, the majority of which rejects war and the propaganda of the ruling elite.

Mölling called the “vulnerability from the inside out” the weak point of western societies. This includes the “unprotected infrastructure,” but also strikes. These days it is so easy “to disturb society,” he complained. “I was in London yesterday. The metro was down and tomorrow there is a complete strike. We are extremely vulnerable.”

Zywietz said it is “quite alarming when the media is doubted” and “journalists are accused of propaganda and corruption.” He referred to statistics that imply that 59 percent of the population is of the opinion that it “is not neutrally informed by the German media.” At the “extreme right and extreme left ends of the political spectrum,” he said, the numbers are “up to 70 and 79 percent.” This is encouraged “by the new means of communication and above all the Internet. Everyone can, so to speak, gather his own truth from the Internet.”

The militaristic and anti-democratic standpoints of the German representatives on the panel prompted absolutely no criticism from the assembled military, academics, journalists, religious leaders and nuns in the audience. The only criticism came from the American international law expert Professor Mary Ellen O’Connell, an opponent of the US practice of targeted assassination and the US-led wars of aggression in the Middle East that are in violation of international law.

Immediately following the introductory statements from Münkler and Weigt, O’Connell said, “I must say I am little bit concerned by some of the commentary so far on suggesting that there is some quasi zone between war and peace and we can’t be clear where we are, we are confused, we don’t know what the rules are and then create some new rules.”

She demanded that international law be respected and that “the boundaries not be blurred.” The charter of the United Nations forbids “war as a means of advancing foreign policy,” she said. It counts as a “general prohibition of war.” War is only allowable in cases of self-defense, she emphasized.

O’Connell called the concept of “hybrid war” a Trojan horse with which the “military-industrial complex” wants to produce a crisis mentality in order to sell drones and other weapons and pursue its war agenda.

The propagandists of German militarism were not impressed by this warning. In the subsequent discussion, Münkler, himself a known proponent of drones, reeled off his well-worn mantra about the “post-heroic society.” This society has “no strong concept of what sacrifice is because of its inner ethical commitments, but also because of its reduced demographic rate of reproduction and the circumstance that it is increasingly cool towards religion.”

Münkler said that the fact that such a society consequently could not “muster” enough personnel for warfare “from the middle of society” was “an unpleasant consequence in many respects.” For Germany, however, this consequence does not apply, he said, because Germany “has held back from many, many engagements.”

The entire event underscored the fact that, seven decades after the terrible crimes and the terror of the Nazis, the German ruling elite is once again ready to throw overboard every moral and political inhibition. Toward the end of the evening, an Oberst (lieutenant colonel) in the audience referred to the fact that in parts of Africa child soldiers are used. Then he directed the following question to the general on the podium: "Is it justifiable for regular soldiers to shoot children and, if not, is it then a legitimate policy for our soldiers to be sent into these areas?"

The answer of General Weigt left scarcely any doubt that the German military is ready to commit terrible crimes once again in defense of the economic and geo-strategic interests of German imperialism.

Weigt declared that he did not want to "give a legal answer, but an answer from the point of view of a soldier." A soldier has to act in "only fractions of a second" the general explained. Then "he will certainly be confronted with having done something that is wrong according to our moral, ethical standards. How can one fight against children? How can one shoot children? But that is indeed exactly, what I am saying, that we will increasingly become involved in conflicts and crises that establish new rules that are not so easy to bring into agreement with our laws and also with our moral compass."