

Zeitenwende in Germany – a new realistic worldview and its implications

Melanie Schmoll*

The war between Ukraine and Russia has profoundly reshaped the security architecture. In Germany, this geopolitical rupture was framed by then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD) as a *Zeitenwende*—a historic turning point marked by a substantial increase in defence spending and a declared departure from key tenets of post-Cold War German foreign and security policy. Since then, the strategic discourse has undergone a notable transformation: terms such as *Kriegstüchtigkeit* (readiness for war) and *Verteidigungsbereitschaft* (defence capability) have gained prominence in political rhetoric, accompanied by calls for a broader “mental rearmament” of society.

These discursive and policy shifts raise a number of critical questions. What are the implications of calls for a society-wide orientation toward “readiness for war”? Which historical references and normative assumptions underlie this evolving security

* Dr Melanie Carina Schmoll, PhD, is a historian and associate fellow at CMSS, University of Calgary and research fellow at the Finkler Institute of Holocaust Research, Bar Ilan University.

paradigm? And how does this reframing of security politics affect the civil–military relationship in contemporary Germany?

Especially considering that there is a more than complicated relationship between the Germans and their *Bundeswehr* (armed forces), society has to rethink. Suddenly, the Bundeswehr is in the spotlight and on everyone's lips. A visible sign of the changing times and the attempt at social realignment was the first national Veterans Day in June 2025. The changing security environment for Germany and its allies and the current threat situation call for a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) that is operational and capable of defence at all times, in which Germany, as the largest economy in Europe, must make its relevant contribution with a reliable and effective Bundeswehr.

When the Minister of Defense Boris Pistorius (SPD) talks about the *Kriegstüchtigkeit* (readiness for war) and the left-wing peace movement does not want to see “war normalized” and the *Bundeswehr glorified*, when the new Foreign Minister Johan Wadephul (CDU) follows US President Trump's lead and wants to spend 5% of annual economic output on military purposes and veterans fight for recognition, then something changes in a country which neither wanted nor was aware of its Bundeswehr.

This article investigates how the emerging policy ideal of *readiness for war* is being articulated across political discourse, institutional reforms, and symbolic initiatives. It asks how notions of security, civic responsibility, and national identity are being renegotiated in the context of Germany's self-declared *Zeitenwende*.

A new realistic world view

Although German foreign and defence policy has been integrated into the structures and institutions of NATO, the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN) and GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) for decades, the current debates are primarily determined by a realistic world view in the political science sense. It is less

about institutionalist approaches¹ or about liberal ideas², which relate primarily to social debates. Although the current situation and debates are also affected by both schools mentioned, and both certainly also offer explanations, a realistic perspective can be observed here above all.³

Contrary to what was assumed shortly after reunification in 1989/1990, Germany has not adopted a more power-oriented foreign and defence policy due to its new size in terms of territory, the sheer number of its fellow citizens, its economic power and the supposed end of the East-West conflict. 35 years after reunification, it is clear that a realistic German foreign, security and defence policy is primarily based on the changed global political situation. Although there have been shifts in structures such as NATO (current threats of withdrawal by the USA and Italy, for example), it is probably above all the global developments in power politics that have developed such a dynamic that the Federal Republic of Germany, in its exposed territorial position and with its history, has undergone rapid development with regard to these policy areas. This is particularly

¹ From an institutionalist perspective, the enmeshment of Germany into various international institutions, first and foremost the European Community/Union and NATO, is a most important fact, because it is assumed that deep institutional commitments such as those that Germany has entered into in the past decades tend to undermine the value of power as a foreign policy goal. Volker Rittberger and Frank Schimmelfennig, "German Foreign Policy After Unification. A Re-Examination of Realist Prognoses", Center for International Relations/Peace and Conflict Studies, Institute for Political Science, University of Tübingen, 1997, ISBN 3-927604-22-4.

² The liberal school of thought places greater importance upon intra-state and inter-societal for explaining foreign policy. As a result, authors representative of this school warn against overrating the discontinuity in the conditions under which German foreign policy is made. According to these authors, is a process in which Germany as well as other states have to adapt to a new form of world politics which is no longer driven exclusively by states, but in which societal and economic actors have become "global players" and are increasingly constraining state action (Czempiel (1993), Maull (1992), Senghaas (1993, 1994), and Wolf (1995) and others). In view of the current global situation, however, this idea seems outdated.

³ There are several variants of realism. Our focus is on the currently dominant one, which is commonly referred to as "neorealism" (or "structural realism"). The seminal neorealist work is Waltz (1979). Other major representatives include Mearsheimer and Grieco. Clearly, the realist school is not a monolithic block and hence not free from internal differences. Neorealists do not agree as to whether states are offensive (Mearsheimer and Gilpin) or defensive positionalists (Waltz and Grieco). It is, however, generally accepted that a state which has experienced a relative increase in power (whether achieved by its own aspirations or not) will use this power to its advantage. According to Waltz's formulation, neorealism is a (systemic) theory of international politics as opposed to a (sub-systemic) theory of foreign policy. Realism does not attach any theoretical importance to "issue-specific power capabilities" Keohane/Nye *Power and Interdependence. World Politics in Transition*, Boston, (Mass: Little, Brown 1977): pp. 30, 53.

evident in the discussions surrounding the Bundeswehr, which not only occupies security) policy actors, but society as a whole. As the realists among the theorists point out, Germany's more power-oriented foreign, defence and security policy was born out of the facts. Schwarz stressed already in 1994, Germany is assuming the role of the "central power of Europe", whether it likes it or not. Rittberger underlined in 1990 that all in all, the "old" Federal Republic could be characterized as an "internationally cooperating democratic trading state"⁴ (Rittberger 1990: 19). But the world has moved on, and Germany not only wants to play a pioneering role⁵ it is also being called upon to do so within the EU. However, a hegemonic role in the traditional sense is not envisaged.⁶

Germany's foreign, security, and defence policy is still to be seen within a continuity of the institutional setting, in which German foreign policy takes shape. Continuity is provided by Germany's unquestioned membership in NATO and the EU.

When we talk about a new view of the world in the sense of a *Zeitenwende*, this should be seen against the backdrop of a realist school of thought. The central assumptions of realism can be summarized as follows: states are rational actors; anarchy and the distribution of power among states are the essential structural characteristics of the international system; under anarchy, the main goal of states is to ensure their survival and autonomy; the most important means to achieve this goal is their (relative) power;

⁴ Rittberger, Volker. Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland - eine Weltmacht? Außenpolitik nach vierzig Jahren, in: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte B4- pp.5, 3-19, 1990.

⁵ As Chancellor Merz emphasized in his first government statement in office on 14 May 2025, Germany must and will constantly expand its own defense capabilities and readiness. "We want to be able to defend ourselves so that we don't have to defend ourselves," said the Federal Chancellor. Strength deters aggression, whereas weakness invites aggression. The goal is therefore a Germany and Europe so strong "that we never have to use our weapons". The Federal Government would provide the Bundeswehr with all the financial resources it needed "to become the strongest conventional army in Europe". See: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2025/kw20-de-regierungserklaerung-merz-1064956>, 24.06.2025.

⁶ The Theory of Hegemonic Stability argues that international order and economic stability are more likely when a single dominant power (hegemon) leads and enforces rules in the global system. The power is based on military, economy and political power (see Kindleberger *Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy. Exploitation, Public Goods, and Free Rides*, in: *International Studies Quarterly* 25:2, pp. pp. 242-254, 1981.1981, Keohane *After Hegemony. Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984, Krasne Regimes and the Limits of Realism. Regimes as Autonomous Variables, in: Krasner, Stephen D.: *International Regimes*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

therefore they strive to maintain their (relative) power in comparison to that of competitor states (defensive positionalism) and, if possible, to increase it (offensive positionalism).⁷ Against this background, German policy is to be seen as realistic. However, in contrast to classical realism in international relations, Germany's position of power has not increased as a result of anything specific, like a new economic strength; no, Germany is reacting realistically by changing its foreign policy and adapting it to the changed situation. As Rittberger et al already emphasized in 1997, there are two realist motivational assumptions leading to different behavioural expectations, i.e. autonomy maximization and influence maximization. Both behavioural expectations are variants of *power politics*, the central concept of the realist school of thought. The assumption that states maximize autonomy is most clearly presented in Waltz's structural realism.⁸

Against the backdrop of the *Zeitenwende*, Germany is now pursuing *autonomy maximization*. More autonomy seems important, not only because of the territorial locations in the heart of Europe and the proximity to potential enemies, but also because of the ineffective EU, which still seems like a toothless tiger, and the US administration's exit fantasies from NATO.

Since the Federal Republic moves towards independence and unilateral action, particularly in the sphere of *high politics*, the core of which is constituted, according to realist theory, by security policy. This maximization of autonomy is particularly evident in the debate surrounding the resumption of compulsory military service, as this would affect the entire population and the personal contribution and is not limited to government spending and the purchase of military equipment. The resumption is currently the central issue when it comes to the turning point and the new German approach to power politics.

⁷ Volker Rittberger and Frank Schimmelpfennig, "German Foreign Policy After Unification. A Re-Examination of Realist Prognoses", *Center for International Relations/Peace and Conflict Studies*, Institute for Political Science, University of Tübingen, 1997, ISBN 3-927604-22-4, p. 9.

⁸ Volker Rittberger and Frank Schimmelpfennig, "German Foreign Policy After Unification. A Re-Examination of Realist Prognoses", *Center for International Relations/Peace and Conflict Studies*, Institute for Political Science, University of Tübingen, 1997, ISBN 3-927604-22-4, p. 9.

Over the last centuries, the Federal Republic has tied itself in many ways to international institutions. Germany now adopts a foreign policy more strongly oriented towards independence and attempts to liberate itself from the numerous restrictions imposed upon it. But again: contrary to the realistic view, Germany will not disentangle from, or at least reduce its commitment to, international institutions. When we talk here about liberation from restrictions, we are talking about limitations that the Federal Republic imposed in large parts, especially because of its own history. This does not mean that Germany and the German people were dissatisfied with this. Quite the opposite! Conducting foreign, security and defence policy without German soldiers being involved, without society being involved through personal commitment or even sacrifice - most people in the Federal Republic liked that very much - is one of the reasons why German society is finding it so difficult to cope with the new situation and a broader "mental rearmament" of society.

This can also be seen by the following numbers: In 2023, 54 percent of respondents wanted Germany to show greater restraint in international crises. Only 38 percent wanted Germany to be more diplomatically active. 71 percent of respondents said no to the question of whether Germany should take on a military leadership role in Europe. Only 28 percent were in favour of this.⁹

Nevertheless, we are now observing an autonomy-oriented realism in German foreign policy and not a hegemonic policy that seeks to gain influence, at least for now. This is also a clear sign that it is less about hegemony, in the sense of the theory of hegemonic stability (Keohane 1984), and more about power politics in the sense of greater independence. The autonomy-oriented realism in German foreign, security, and defence policy can also be seen in particular with regard to questions of troop strength, voluntary service or the resumption of compulsory military service.

In order to understand why the debates in Germany are so heated, it is first necessary to take a look at the past, also to understand the aforementioned self-imposed restrictions.

⁹ Röhling, Marc: *Mehrheit der Bevölkerung lehnt deutsche Führungsrolle in der Welt ab*, in: *Der Spiegel*: <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/politik-mehrheit-der-deutschen-lehnen-deutsche-fuehrungsrolle-in-der-welt-ab-a-db327f64-629a-4f92-bae3-a9804e131231>, 2023, 23.06.2025.

Difficult past

After the surrender of the German *Wehrmacht* on 7-8 May 1945, the victorious powers took political control of the whole of Germany: the USA, Great Britain and France in the western occupation zones, the Soviet Union in the eastern occupation zone. The *Wehrmacht* and everything military or militarily useful were disbanded. The almost complete demilitarization was followed by political decentralization: by 1947, 16 states had been created, but there was still no central authority for Germany as a whole. Deindustrialization led to the destruction of armaments and heavy industry. The confiscated goods were sent as reparations to the countries occupied by Germany during the Second World War (1939–1945), primarily to France and the Soviet Union.

In response to the increasing confrontation between East and West, the Western powers commissioned the West German states to discuss a democratic constitution in 1948. Even after its foundation in 1949, however, the Federal Republic of Germany still did not have full sovereignty. The Occupation Statute¹⁰ delimited the powers and responsibilities between the future German government and the Allied Control Authority,” and the rights of the Western Allies were still considerable. As a partially sovereign state, the Federal Republic of Germany initially had no armed forces of its own. With the founding of the Federal Border Guard in 1951, a paramilitary federal police force was created, primarily to protect the inner-German border. However, as early as 1947/48, some politicians in both the USA and West Germany were determined to involve the new Federal Republic in the defence of Western Europe.

A few days before his election as the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic, Konrad Adenauer (CDU), wrote a memorandum in which he drew the attention of the US High Commissioner, John McCloy, to the need for West German armed forces. The start of the Korean War in June 1950 accelerated this process. The invasion of the communist North against the South, which was under Western influence, made one thing clear: the communist world was also prepared to expand its sphere of influence through war. With the founding of the Western European Union (WEU) and the declared

¹⁰ Besatzungsstatut/ Occupation Statute, full text:

https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/text_of_the_occupation_statute_of_germany_bonn_12_may_1949-en-6750efd3-4b34-4fec-9a4a-df0ff125d302.html, 19.06.2025.

renunciation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, the Federal Republic of Germany became the 15th member state of NATO on 5 May 1955. On 7 June 1955, the “Blank Office”¹¹ in the former Ermekeil barracks in Bonn was renamed the Federal Ministry of Defence. Theodor Blank became the first West German Minister of Defence. Although there was an office and German delegates had taken part in various conferences on the European Defence Community (EDC), there were still no soldiers until 12 November 1955. But on this day, the 200th birthday of the Prussian army reformer Lieutenant General Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755–1813), the first 101 volunteers received their certificates of appointment for voluntary service in the armed forces. The founding of the Bundeswehr was officially completed.¹² But the difficult process of the German public coming to terms with the armed forces had only just begun.

Shortly after the foundation of the Bundeswehr, general conscription was introduced in Germany on 21 July 1956, when the Conscription Act (WPflG) came into force.¹³ On 1 April 1957, a conscription call took place for the first time on the basis of this law. However, some groups of people were exempt from conscription (e.g. police officers and priests). Others were not conscripted for military service because of their health. There were also opportunities to do military service through a multi-year commitment, e.g. as a volunteer in a fire brigade or in the Technical Relief Agency. In 1968, conscription was anchored in the newly introduced Article 12a of the German “Basic Law” (Grundgesetz – GG).¹⁴

Alternative military service (called *alternative service* according to Article 12a, Paragraph 2 of the “Basic Law”) refers to services that could be performed in place of military service to perform compulsory military service. In principle, military service was

¹¹ Adenauer appointed the CDU member of the Bundestag Theodor Blank as “Federal Chancellor's Representative for Issues Relating to the Increase in Allied Troops”. Because of this unwieldy title, the term “Amt Blank” was soon coined. The office was basically the predecessor of the later Ministry of Defense.

¹² Bundeswehr: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/ueber-die-bundeswehr/geschichte-bundeswehr/gruendung-bundeswehr> 18.06.2025.

¹³ Conscription Act (Wehrpflichtgesetz – WPflG) in the version published in the Federal Law Gazette I p. 1730 on August 15, 2011, as last amended by Article 12 of the German Constitution (Grundgesetz) on 28 June 2021 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 2250).

¹⁴ Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (Grundgesetz – GG) in the revised version published in the Federal Law Gazette Part III, classification number 100-1, as last amended by Article 1 of the Act of 29 September 2020 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 2048).

the normal form in Germany. There was no right to choose between it and civilian resp. Community service is an alternative military service. On the basis of Art. 4, para. 3 of the *Basic Law*, however, there was a right to recognition as a conscientious objector. This right was already provided by the *Basic Law* in its original version from 1949. Other forms of alternative military service were generally recognized by the legislature due to their non-profit status and could be recognized with the consent of the competent authority. Conscripts who applied conscientious objection (“conscientious objection application”) were exempt from military service after their recognition, but could be used for civilian activities in the event of a defence. As a rule, recognized conscientious objectors performed community service as an alternative military service. Recognized objectors also had the option of doing another service abroad. Within the framework of international understanding, recognized conscientious objectors performed in various forms. The service lasted two months longer than regular community service. Recognized conscientious objectors who, for reasons of conscience, were also unable to do community service (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses) were given the opportunity to take up employment in a hospital or another facility for treatment, nursing and care instead. The employment lasted a year longer than the community service.

Until 2011, the mandatory military service could be replaced by a multi-year obligation to participate in civil defence or disaster control according to paragraph 13a of the *Conscription Act* as mentioned, or according to paragraph 14 of the “Act on the Civilian Service of Conscientious Objectors” (short: Civilian Service Act).¹⁵ In contrast to civil or military service, you could continue your usual life, since the duties could be accomplished in addition to study or work. However, recognition as a helper presupposed that the responsible civil protection authority had given its approval.

The service in civil protection or civil protection could be done with the following organizations: Federal Technical Agency for Relief (THW), German Life Saving Society (DLRG), German Red Cross, Johanniter Accident Aid, Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund Germany, Maltese Relief Service, management units of the civil protection authorities, and volunteer fire brigades (service lasted four years).

¹⁵ Civil Service Act (Zivildienstgesetz - ZDG) in the version published on 17 May 2005 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1346), as last changed by Article 7 of the law of 12 December 2019 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 2652).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War marked a turning point in world politics, which was a profound turning point also for the Bundeswehr. Practically overnight, one of its essential core tasks - namely, the military deterrence of the Warsaw Pact within the framework of NATO - became obsolete. As a consequence, the Bundeswehr has been downsized since 1991, the defence budget has been successively reduced and compulsory military service has been suspended. The Bundeswehr was no longer confronted with the tasks of traditional national and alliance defence. From the 1990s onwards, the armed forces had to face new challenges: International crisis management and the fight against terrorist organizations were now the army's main tasks. This was evident, for example, in the missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Afghanistan. However, these developments took place without much public debate and did not attract much attention from the general public.

Traditional national and alliance defence was perceived less and less as part of the Bundeswehr's mission, as Germany saw itself surrounded exclusively by *friends* in the wake of NATO and EU enlargement to the east, and many believed that direct threats from other countries were a long way off. These set developments in motion that encouraged a move away from operational capability in a conventional deployment scenario. Specifically, the Bundeswehr increasingly lost the ability to fulfill its actual constitutional core task - national and alliance defence. Relevant key capabilities, such as air defence, were almost completely abandoned in this context. In times of international crisis management, however, the increasingly deteriorating condition of the troops did not pose a major problem, at least from a mission perspective. International missions could be carried out within the framework of so-called pooling - the pooling of personnel and material from the entire armed forces - and the mission could thus be fulfilled.¹⁶

On 15 December 2010, the federal cabinet decided to skip the mandatory military service. The newly introduced paragraph 2 of the *Conscription Act* (WPflG)¹⁷ then suspended the legal obligation to perform mandatory military service on 1 July 2011. However, conscription continues, but conscripts are no longer drafted in peacetime.

¹⁶ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS): <https://www.kas.de/de/bundeswehr>, 2025, 23.06.2025.

¹⁷ Conscription Act (Wehrpflichtgesetz – WPflG) in the version published in the Federal Law Gazette I p. 1730 on August 15, 2011, as last amended by Article 12 of the German Constitution (Grundgesetz) on 28 June 2021 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 2250).

Opponents of this significant step argued then and now that unless young people leave their social bubbles, at least for basic training and meet in the *Bundeswehr* barracks - coming from all social classes - the embedding of the troops in society cannot succeed. The historical horror scenario is still the Weimar Republic, when the *Reichswehr*, decoupled from the democratic state, led a dangerous life of its own as a “state within a state”.¹⁸ Again, a negative historical role model that plays a major role in Germany with regard to the *Bundeswehr*.

Despite all the discussions, on 1 January 2011, all conscripts were called up for the last time, and since 1 March 2011, conscripts have no longer been forced to serve against their will. With the suspension of compulsory military service in Germany on 1 July 2011, community service was also suspended. For volunteers, the Federal Volunteer Service was launched on 1 July 2011, as a *successor* to the civil service.¹⁹ This decision was also taken more or less quietly by the public.

Current debates

This lack of awareness should now change, because against the backdrop of this turning point in history, German society and the public must also be involved in further developments, whether they want to be or not. One attempt to make the *Bundeswehr* more visible to the public was the first National Veterans Day 15 June 2025, which fell in the middle of a heated debate about the reintroduction of compulsory military service. It must also be seen in the overall context of current debates surrounding the *Bundeswehr* and the autonomy-oriented realism in German foreign, security, and defence policy.

The suspension of the compulsory military service applies, as mentioned, only in peacetime, and that conscription can be reactivated by the Parliament if deemed necessary. Article 12a of the *Basic Law* providing that every German male “may be obliged to serve in the armed forces, in the Federal Border Guard or a civil defence association from the age of eighteen”, remains unaffected by the said suspension. Article 4 provides

¹⁸ Tagesschau: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gesellschaft/bundeswehr-gesellschaft-100.html>, 2023, 23.06.2025.

¹⁹ Deutscher Bundestag, Kurzinformation, On a National Mandatory Military Service, WD 2 - 3000 - 087/22 (3. November 2022).

that “No one may be forced to do military service with a weapon against her/his conscience” (“*Niemand darf gegen sein Gewissen zum Kriegsdienst mit der Waffe gezwungen werden*”), so that in case of conscription, it is possible to perform unarmed military service. In Germany, the law does not provide for the conscription of female personnel.

With the suspension of conscription, the Bundeswehr has become a volunteer-only army staffed

with Professional Soldiers (*Berufssoldaten*), Regular or Temporary Soldiers (*Zeitsoldaten*), who serve a limited term, as well as Volunteers who serve a short term. Regular Soldiers can commit themselves to a service term of between two and 25 years. Volunteers can enlist for a term between seven and 23 months. Military Service is open to women and men alike, aged 17 and over. Minors (aged under 18) are requested to produce a parental permission and are not allowed to be trained with weapons until they reach the majority age. The age limit depends on the professional and educational record of the applicant as well as on the intended military career and can be (exceptionally) as high as 50 years.²⁰

In April 2025, the Bundeswehr had around 57,688 Professional Soldiers and 112,789 Regular Soldiers. Around 11,818 Soldiers are Volunteers, 201 Volunteers are serving in the military service in homeland security. A total of around 24,675 women (13, 62 percent) served in the armed forces in 2024.²¹

The Bundeswehr has recently ramped up its recruitment efforts. In light of growing military demands and the Ukraine War, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (SPD) said in early June 2025 that Germany needs up to 60,000 more service personnel to meet NATO goals. The new security demands have sparked debate about a return to military conscription, which was abolished in 2011. For now, Chancellor Friedrich Merz' (CDU) coalition government aims to strengthen the military on a voluntary basis and make serving more attractive to young people.

Also in June 2025, reports emerged that Federal Defense Minister Boris Pistorius may recruit 10,000 additional soldiers and 1,000 civilian employees for the Bundeswehr

²⁰ Deutscher Bundestag, Kurzinformation, Military Service in Germany, WD 2 - 3000 - 025/21 (17. März 2021).

²¹ Statista: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/38401/umfrage/personalbestand-der-bundeswehr-seit-2000/> 19.06.2025.

this year. Citing a draft budget for 2025 that had previously been kept secret, Finance Minister Lars Klingbeil (also SPD) had actually specified a personnel reduction of 0.5 percent, with the exception of the defence department. Pistorius had applied for a total of 11,000 new jobs and received approval. Due to the amendment to the “Basic Law” passed in March 2025, the recruitment can now be financed via loans despite the debt brake.²²

These developments must be seen in the light of the country's and the Bundeswehr's *Kriegstüchtigkeit*, its suitability or readiness for war. Whether this can be achieved with a purely voluntary army is unclear. It also appears that Pistorius is considering a kind of two-stage plan to recruit more soldiers for the *Bundeswehr*: Stage 1 relies on volunteering. However, if this is not enough, then stage 2 would follow: the Bundestag would be called upon to vote on a return to compulsory military service. However, it is also unclear who this would affect: men and women? From what year of birth? Would there be an option to refuse?

The coalition does not really seem to be in agreement here either: there is agreement that the Bundeswehr needs more soldiers. The security situation has changed drastically. There is also agreement that military service needs to be reformed. The coalition agreement between the CDU and SPD states: "We are creating a new, attractive military service that is initially based on voluntary service."²³ What is important here is the term *initially* and how it is to be understood. The CDU does not seem to want to wait as long as the smaller coalition partner SPD. Veterans Day is therefore also intended to encourage more people to volunteer for service in the Bundeswehr.

The debate about the reintroduction of compulsory military service is just one part of the discussion about the *Zeitenwende*, the beginning of a new political leadership, with all its stumbling blocks and pitfalls, as well as military spending. In the current security policy situation, the military is of particular importance. With the *Zeitenwende*, more money is now to be released for defence. Almost half of the German population (46%)

²² NTV: <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Pistorius-darf-in-diesem-Jahr-wohl-10-000-neue-Soldaten-einstellen-article25850161.html> 23.06.2025.

²³ Koalitionsvertrag: <https://www.koalitionsvertrag2025.de/> 19.06.2025.

agrees with the increased spending on defence, while a quarter of the population still considers it to be too low.²⁴

Shortly after taking office, the new Federal Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul (CDU) said that he would follow the US administration and advocate annual spending of 5% of economic output on the military. The statement led to an outcry. Not only is it seemingly unforgivable to agree with or follow US President Trump on anything, but the statement was apparently not agreed upon internally either. The question then quickly arose: 5% is that even possible? According to the latest information from Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU), every percentage point more for Germany would currently mean around 45 billion euros more in defence spending. At five percent, according to Merz's calculations, defence spending of around 225 billion euros per year would be necessary.²⁵ Whether this is socially and politically desirable and justifiable is up for debate. In June 2025, it becomes obvious: NATO allies have reached a consensus to increase spending on defence to 5 percent of their countries' GDP by 2035. 3.5 percent of GDP will be spent on *hard defence* that will include weapons and troops, and an additional 1.5 percent on defence-related investments such as cybersecurity and military mobility.²⁶

Ambivalent relationship with the Bundeswehr and veterans

National Veterans Day - what is completely normal in other countries is a novelty in Germany and marks a significant shift in a country that has been very ambivalent about its military. And again, it is needed to look back: The main reasons for the ambivalent feelings are, of course, the Second World War (1939–1945), the mass murder and the greatest crime in the history of mankind, the Holocaust²⁷, but also the veneration of the *Wehrmacht* by the National Socialists.

²⁴ IFSH: <https://ifsh.de/news-detail/24-april-mehr-militaer-oder-mehr-diplomatie>, 23.06.2025.

²⁵ ZDF: <https://www.zdfheute.de/politik/deutschland/verteidigungsausgaben-fuenf-prozent-trump-wadephul-100.html>, 17.06.2025.

²⁶ EURONEWS: <https://www.euronews.com/2025/06/23/nato-agrees-to-5-higher-defence-spending-target-ahead-key-summit-at-the-hague> 23.06.2025.

²⁷ The word Holocaust comes from ancient Greek. The word Holocaust is derived from the Greek *holokauston*, a translation of the Hebrew word *'olah*, meaning a *burnt sacrifice offered whole to God*. This word was chosen, and gained wide usage, because, in the ultimate manifestation of the National Socialists killing program, the bodies

These are the obvious historical reasons as to why a culture of appreciation for veterans is only now developing in Germany. The tradition of celebrating war veterans ended with the defeat of National Socialist Germany in the Second World War in 1945. The National Socialistic so-called Heroes Memorial Day was abolished and replaced by a national day of mourning. After the *Wehrmacht*, the National Socialist unified armed forces, was disbanded, Germany had no army at all for a decade. Veterans' associations were also banned during this time.

This ambivalence is also due to the word veteran itself, which still seems a little strange. Linking the little-used term *veteran* to the Bundeswehr in a new way was challenging because many associated it with the Second World War (1939–1945). A new definition was needed. In 2018, the then Minister of Defence, Ursula von der Leyen (CDU), finally provided one. In an order of the day, she decreed, "A veteran of the *Bundeswehr* is anyone who is in active service as a soldier in the Bundeswehr or has retired honourably from this service and has not lost their rank."²⁸ According to this broad definition, the country has around 10 million veterans, most of whom no longer wear a uniform.²⁹

And although this new definition has been in place since 2018, the German public still often interprets it differently. Veterans exist abroad, not in Germany. These views are

of the victims were consumed whole in crematoria or open fires. Since 1945, it has been synonymous with the murder of European Jews during the Second World War (1939–1945). Jews speak of the *Shoah*, which is the Hebrew word for *catastrophe*. The Holocaust was an unprecedented genocide, total and systematic, perpetrated by National Socialist Germany and its collaborators, with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people. The primary motivation was the national socialist anti-Semitic racist ideology. Between 1933 and 1941 Germany pursued a policy that dispossessed the Jews of their rights and their property, followed by the branding and the concentration of the Jewish population. This policy gained broad support in Germany and much of occupied Europe. In 1941, following the invasion of the Soviet Union, the National Socialists and their collaborators launched the systematic mass murder of the Jews. By 1945 nearly six million Jews had been murdered. (see. Melanie Carina Schmoll "Hatred of Jews – A Failure of Holocaust Education", Germany, 2025, p. 22).

²⁸ Bundeswehr: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/ueber-die-bundeswehr/veteranen> 19.06.2025.

²⁹ It is important to know here that the order of the day issued by the then Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen applies, for example, when it comes to members of the National People's Army (of the GDR). The decisive factors are, on the one hand, active or former service in the *Bundeswehr* and, on the other, honorable retirement from service. Members of the National People's Army (*NVA Nationale Volksarmee*) of the GDR who were not subsequently taken over by the Bundeswehr are not considered veterans of the *Bundeswehr* in this sense (<https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/ueber-die-bundeswehr/veteranen> 19.06.2025).

shared not only by the political left but also by peace activists and the peace movement. The big concern here is that war is being normalized, especially in light of the historical background. They argue for recognition and honouring of people who help in war and do not fight, e.g. doctors and other medical personnel.

There is still no living veteran culture in Germany, even though public events such as *Armed Forces Day*, the *March of Remembrance* and, in particular, the *Invictus Games* in Düsseldorf in September 2023 were intended to give visible expression to the appreciation and recognition of the achievements of active and former members of the armed forces, especially those wounded in action. The foundation of a veteran's badge, which had already been awarded over 90,000 times by the end of 2023, also served this purpose. In addition, a veterans' home is to be set up in future to provide temporary accommodation for veterans in need.³⁰ A veterans' office had been set up in Berlin to offer active and former soldiers a point of contact for their concerns.

The phrase “the Bundeswehr belongs at the heart of society” sounds like a mantra of recent weeks, but it dates back to 2011, when the then Federal President Christian Wulff warned of Germans' *indifference* towards their armed forces. For good reason: after all, the perception of soldiers had become largely disconnected from the majority of society. Death, injury, traumatization - in the years from 2009 onwards, the Bundeswehr experienced the most difficult battles in its history with the fight against the Taliban in Kunduz in northern Afghanistan. At the same time, surveys showed that a large majority of the population rejected the Afghanistan mission.³¹

To date, the relationship between Germans and their armed forces has only hesitantly changed for the better. A strategic culture is needed in Germany, which, in addition to the national security strategy, should also include strategic communication. This means that the tasks, goals and missions of the Bundeswehr must be communicated to the population in an understandable and comprehensible way, taking into account global dynamics and multiple crises. This is, first and foremost, the task of the Federal Government. It must address the challenges and problems. Democratic societies have a right to a transparent decision-making process and clear communication with regard to

³⁰ Bundeswehr: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/rolle-veteranen-geschichte-gesellschaft-5725750>, 19.06.2025.

³¹ Tagesschau: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gesellschaft/bundeswehr-gesellschaft-100.html> 23.06.2025.

their own armed forces. In order to be able to act on an equal footing in the NATO alliance and the EU, but also in other multinational organizations such as the UN, and to be taken seriously in its interests and goals of protecting the international rules-based order, it requires an operational Bundeswehr that is supported internally by the citizens.³²

Parliamentary army but outside society?

The Bundeswehr is a parliamentary army. That is why the Bundestag was the right place for then-Chancellor Scholz (SPD) to announce the *Zeitenwende*. It would probably have made more sense to prepare this speech in advance through a public debate and to involve parliamentarians and society in the process, but this was not done in the slightest. Nevertheless, at least the location—the parliament—was the right one.

When the Federal Republic of Germany was founded, there were good reasons for not having an army. It was not until 1955 that it established its own armed forces in the form of the Bundeswehr. As the *Reichstag* was not a democratically elected parliament based on the rule of law between 1933 and 1945, it had no influence on the armed forces, among other things. As part of the concept of *Wehrhafte Demokratie* (defensive democracy), the decision-makers in relation to a future Bundeswehr chose specific mechanisms that would bind the Bundeswehr to parliament, democracy and the rule of law. Parliament, the elected representatives of the people, was therefore given control over the Bundeswehr. In 1956, the so-called Defense Constitution regulated the legal basis for the parliamentary army in the democratic Federal Republic.

According to the *Basic Law*, parliament has budgetary sovereignty and thus control over the armed forces. The *Basic Law* also provides for a “

Defense Committee. There has also been a military commissioner since 1956. Soldiers can approach this auxiliary body of parliament directly with any concerns they may have. The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces submits an annual written report to the *Bundestag*.

³²KAS (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung): <https://www.kas.de/de/bundeswehr>, 23.06.2025.

The Bundestag also decides on the extension of a deployment mandate, usually on an annual basis. Parliament's control function is particularly evident in foreign deployments. The Bundestag must give its consent before German troops are deployed abroad. To what extent and in what form the Bundestag must approve an armed deployment abroad has been regulated by the *Parliamentary Participation Act* since 2005. It defines the participation rights and possible reservations of the German *Bundestag*. Approval for a deployment is generally limited to twelve months and must, if necessary, be extended after this period has expired.³³

The idea of a parliamentary army and a *Bundeswehr at the heart of society* is also reflected in the decision to hold a National Veterans Day. After all, the Bundeswehr can only be effective and successful as a parliamentary army with the legitimacy of the population at large.

The National Veterans Day is based on a resolution of the German *Bundestag* and the joint motion by the SPD, CDU/CSU, Bündnis 90/The Greens and FDP parliamentary groups entitled: "For comprehensive appreciation - introducing a National Veterans Day and improving care for veterans and their families".³⁴ On 25 April 2024, members of parliament adopted the motion by a large majority with the votes of all parliamentary groups, with the Left Party abstaining, and decided to introduce a National Veterans Day and improve care for veterans and their families. The Left Party abstained because they were criticizing what they called *symbolic politics*. The members of parliament (MPs) set different priorities in the debate at the time: SPD MP Johannes Arlt pointed out that the word veteran was rarely used in Germany. This had to change. Far too rarely were veterans asked about their personal experiences and experiences in the *Bundeswehr's* missions abroad. Soldiers had been injured, traumatized or killed in these missions. Veterans Day opens a new chapter in veterans' policy and closes a gap in remembrance policy. Kerstin Vieregge (CDU/CSU) conceded that the Bundestag had *not always covered itself in glory* in its dealings with the Bundeswehr and veterans. All too often, both in parliament and in German society, there was merely a *friendly lack of interest* in the armed forces. Even though much has already been achieved in the care of injured and

³³ Bundesministerium der Verteidigung: <https://www.bmvg.de/de/themen/verteidigung/bundeswehr-parlamentsarmee>, 17.06.2025.

³⁴ Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 20/ 11138, Deutscher Bundestag, 20. Wahlperiode.

traumatized soldiers, soldiers still tell us about long procedures and bureaucratic hurdles. Sara Nanni (Bündnis 90/The Greens) referred to the testimonies of Bundeswehr soldiers before the Bundestag's committee of inquiry into the Afghanistan mission, who had gone far beyond their physical and mental limits. Being a soldier also meant risking injury or even death in order to preserve freedom and peace. The soldiers deserved to be seen by society. Christian Sauter (FDP) emphasized the special responsibility of the Bundestag for the Bundeswehr. That is why Veterans Day should not only be celebrated at a central location in Berlin, but everywhere in Germany.³⁵

National Veterans Day is intended to strengthen the bond between the Bundeswehr and society. The German Bundeswehr is a parliamentary army - this is also reflected here. Parliament has decided on this day. The parliament is therefore not only closely associated with military operations, but also with honouring the achievements and service of Bundeswehr members, veterans and their families.

But it was not only the German parliament that was involved in implementing the parliamentary resolution about Veterans Day: stakeholders from politics and administration (federal government, federal states, cities and municipalities), veterans' associations and social networks were active alongside the federal government and the German *Bundestag*. The Federal Ministry of Defence, as the employer of all active servicewomen and men and with its interface to the veterans' associations via the Bundeswehr Veterans Office, has been tasked with coordinating the organization.³⁶ The various veterans' associations and veterans' organizations, as well as the social actors who are committed to helping veterans, were to be given an appropriate platform for their information work and dialogue with citizens. Veterans Day was organized by the Bundestag's Defense Committee, the veterans' associations and the social and welfare associations.³⁷

June 15, 2025, was the first National Veterans Day to be celebrated by the Federal Republic of Germany. With a celebration at the Reichstag in Berlin and more than 60

³⁵ Deutscher Bundestag: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2024/kw17-de-veteranentag-993234>, 17.06.2025.

³⁶ Veteranentag: <https://www.veteranentag.gov.de/veteranentag-2025> 17.06.2025.

³⁷ Bundeswehr: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/bundeswehr-erleben/veranstaltungen-bundeswehr/veteranentag-veranstaltung-berlin-5918926>, 17.06.2025.

events, the achievements of active and former soldiers for society were honoured. And not just in the heart of the capital and in the government district as a clear commitment to the free and democratic basic order of the republic, but nationwide.

In future, Veterans Day will be celebrated every year in mid-June. The date was not chosen at random: On June 15, 2019, the Veterans' Badge was awarded to veterans for the first time. The aim of Veterans Day is to honour active and former servicewomen and men of the Bundeswehr for their service in the armed forces and to bring their concerns to the attention of the public and thus further into civil society. Many veterans have accepted personal hardship in order to protect their fellow citizens.³⁸ The Bundeswehr has been deployed abroad in more than 50 countries since 1959. Since the 1990s, it has also been involved in peacekeeping and peacekeeping missions as well as in mission-equivalent obligations outside and within the NATO alliance area.

National Veterans Day is just a visible sign to the outside world. In the aforementioned Bundestag resolution, the parliamentary groups also spoke out in favour of improving aftercare for soldiers who have suffered injuries in the line of duty, particularly during deployment abroad. Measures are to be taken to ensure barrier-free counselling for veterans nationwide and to reduce participation requirements and bureaucratic hurdles, as well as the time it takes to process requests to six months. The *Act on the Continued Use of Armed Forces Personnel* is also to be extended to include former professional soldiers. The quality and scope of treatment, rehabilitation services and preventative measures for soldiers and their families who have suffered operational injuries are to be evaluated externally, and the establishment of a Bundeswehr inpatient therapy facility is to be examined. The *German Hardship Foundation* should be strengthened as an important supporter of the welfare concept for veterans and all people and their families who have suffered as a result of their service in the *Bundeswehr*.³⁹

15 June is, therefore, only logical when it comes to improving the public visibility of those who have served and are still serving for Germany. But of course, this is by no means the end of the story: From the veterans' point of view, there is still a long way to

³⁸ Bundeswehr: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/bundeswehr-erleben/veranstaltungen-bundeswehr/veteranentag-veranstaltung-berlin-5918926> 17.06.2025.

³⁹ Deutscher Bundestag: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2024/kw17-de-veteranentag-993234> , 17.06.2025.

go in providing for wounded soldiers. Lengthy examinations and bureaucratic hurdles often mean delays in receiving care.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that 15 June is at least a start and that something is obviously moving in German society.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed how the German call for *Kriegstüchtigkeit* reflects a broader transformation in the country's strategic self-understanding in the aftermath of the Ukrainian–Russian war. It has been argued that this shift cannot be reduced to defence policy alone, but must be seen as part of a more comprehensive renegotiation of Germany's civil–military relationship, political culture, and national identity. The push for greater autonomy in foreign and security policy—often framed as *Zeitenwende*—is increasingly linked to efforts to modernize the Bundeswehr and re-anchor it more visibly within society.

Germany's current trajectory reveals a dual ambition: to strengthen its capacity to act independently in international affairs and to forge a new societal consensus around military responsibility. Symbolic initiatives such as the National Veterans Day in 2025 are part of this development, indicating a shift not only in policy but in the political imagination of the nation's role and obligations. At the same time, unresolved questions remain: How can a parliamentary army be more firmly integrated into society at large? Could the reintroduction of military service play a part in this process? And what are the democratic limits of a political culture increasingly shaped by security imperatives?

Ultimately, the emerging paradigm of *Kriegstüchtigkeit* raises fundamental questions about the balance between military strength and democratic accountability. As Germany navigates this transformation, continued critical reflection will be essential—not only to assess the institutional reforms at hand, but to understand the deeper political and cultural realignments they signify. This can only succeed if society, politics, and the military work together.

⁴⁰ DW (Deutsche Welle): <https://www.dw.com/en/german-veterans-day-2025-explained/a-72912299>, 17.06.2025.

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