‘Press the Reset Button:’ Right-Wing Extremism in Germany’s Military

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/18/press-the-reset-button-right-wing-extremism-in-germanys-military/

TOBIAS HOF, SEP 18 2020

In June 2020, German newspapers first reported a disturbing – but perhaps unsurprising – scandal involving special forces of the German Federal Army (*Bundeswehr*), the *Kommando Spezialkräfte* (KSK). A young officer of the KSK had written a letter to the German Minister of Defence, Annegret Kramp Karrenbauer (CDU), outlining what he chastised as a “toxic” environment within his unit. Commenting on recent examples of right-wing extremism in the KSK, he claimed that many commanding officers were aware, but either chose to collectively ignore, or even tolerate, the incidents.

Key components of the letter were confirmed by Christof Gramm, president of the Military Counterintelligence Service (*Militärischer Abschirmdienst*; MAD), tasked with (among other things) ‘identifying extremist soldiers and removing them from active duty.’ (Daniel Koehler, “A Threat from Within? Exploring the Link between the Extreme Right and the Military,” *ICCT Policy Brief*, September 2019, 14) He reported that at least 20 members of the KSK and 600 soldiers in the regular army are either known to harbor radical right-wing beliefs or are skeptical of the current political system and the constitution. While Gramm rejected the existence of a right-wing underground army, he did confirm that communication networks between soldiers and civilian far right groups exist and that a large amount of KSK weaponry – 62 kilograms of explosives and 48,000 rounds of ammunition – had recently disappeared without a trace.

Some politicians were quick to point out that the number of right-wing extremists within the armed forces – approximately 1.400 people serve in the KSK, and the German armed forces have around 180,000 active soldiers – is marginal. They voiced their ‘concern that the large majority of upstanding soldiers and police officers might suddenly be viewed with suspicion’. (Matthias Bartsch et. al., “The Dark Side of State Power. Exploring Right-Wing Extremism in Germany’s Police and Military” *Der Spiegel* (13 August 2020) However, public outcry outweighed such trivialization attempts. The German weekly *Der Spiegel* wrote that ‘any member of the public service who does not firmly believe in the German constitution is a problem.’ So how big and how real is the threat of right-wing extremists infiltrating the German army? And what can be done about it?

A Look into the Past

Right-wing infiltration of the German military and its special forces is not new, and today’s public outcry and calls for reforms are but another chapter in a long history. Only if we historically contextualize today’s right-wing sympathies among German soldiers can we gain a better understanding of the challenges ahead. When the West German *Bundeswehr* was founded in 1955, many of its officers and soldiers had previously served in the*Wehrmacht* or the *Waffen-SS*. The issue was less the fact that former members of the *Wehrmacht* were included in the new *Bundeswehr* (as it would have been impossible to quickly (re-)build a German military without their skills and knowledge), but rather that West German politicians and officers never really critically engaged with the Nazi past of leading figures within the ranks of the new *Bundeswehr*. Instead, they conveniently used Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg’s failed assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler on 20 July 1944 (‘Operation Valkyrie’) as proof of the *Wehrmacht’s* opposition to the Nazi regime. In addition, officers who were associated with the plot to kill Hitler, such as Hans Speidel and Adolf Heusinger, were promoted to senior ranks in the *Bundeswehr* to highlight the image of the

'clean Wehrmacht'.

Hans Speidel and Adolf Heusinger at the time of the Petersberg negotiations (1951). Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-2005-0096 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Since the late 1960s, right-wing extremism radicalized in West Germany as a response to the new coalition-government between the Social-Democrats (SPD) and the Liberals (FDP), the increasing influence of left-wing ideas in politics and society and Willy Brandt's 'Neue Ostpolitik'. Several far-right wing groups, including the *Nationalsozialistische Kampfgruppe Großdeutschland* (1972), the *Gruppe Neumann* (1973) or the *Wehrsportgruppe Rohwer* (1977-1978) attempted to overthrow the political system through armed struggle. They were responsible for attempted murders and bombing attacks, anti-Semitic graffiti, bank robberies, as well as the theft of weapons and ammunition from the armed forces. Counted among their members were several *Bundeswehr* soldiers and officers (Daniel Koehler, Right-Wing Terrorism in the 21st Century. The National Socialist Underground and the History of Terror from the Far-Right in Germany. New York: Routledge, 2016, 71-90).

In 1996, the *Kommando Spezialkräfte* (KSK), part of the *Bundeswehr's* Rapid Forces Division, was founded. Its main tasks, to date, include arresting war criminals and terrorists, training the armed forces of international partners, rescuing German citizens, and obtaining intelligence from areas of conflict ("KSK-Elitesoldat als Islamist enttarnt," *Der Spiegel*, 18 June 2020). The KSK is not the only elite unit in the Germany military, but it is perhaps the most well-known. Yet, even such an elite unit was far from immune to right-wing infiltration. One of the first well-documented incidents occurred in June 2000 when 22-year-old André Chladek, a former KSK soldier turned neo-Nazi, stole six pistols and 1,550 rounds of ammunition from a *Bundeswehr* depot. He intended to kill leading politicians, army officers, journalists and other representatives of civil society. In 2017, approximately 60 members of the KSK participated at a goodbye-party for an officer. Pig heads were thrown, right-wing extremist music was played, and the

Hitler salute given – yet none of the attendees raised any concerns.

Right-Wing Extremist Appeal and Germany's Military

But why are the German armed forces – regular or elite – so susceptible to right-wing ideas? A 1970s study among German soldiers revealed that a close relationship exists between a right-wing extremist worldview and a favorable attitude towards military life with its emphasis on hierarchy, comradeship, and obedience (Koehler 2019, 17). In a more recent study, political scientist Hans-Gerd Jaschke found that a high-percentage of German soldiers exhibited a 'partly aggressive rejection' of multicultural urban society.

In addition, some experts focusing on structural concerns argue that the numbers of right-wing extremists within the armed forces increased after the end of the mandatory service requirement in 2011. The reform of 2011, so the argument goes, led to a dangerous disconnect between the German army and civil society, which would eventually foster an elitist and undemocratic mentality among some soldiers. (Michael Wolffsohn, "Verführbare Soldaten," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 3 January 2013) At first glance, statistics published by the MAD seem not to support this claim, indicating instead that the confirmed numbers of right-wing radicals have actually declined since 2011. Statistics, however, should be evaluated on the robustness of their criteria as well as their results. First, MAD uses a very narrow definition of right-wing ideology, which can result in underreporting. Second, the last broad empirical study on the worldviews of active soldiers was conducted thirteen years ago and found that approximately 50 percent of study participants were critical of the contemporary political system.

In the case of the KSK, other factors have to be taken into account as well. The KSK, which is stationed in its own facilities in Calw, is known for its intensive training and close comradeship, common across many elite units. Witnesses claim that the unit's training focuses on obedience, which goes beyond the normal limits, establishing a 'toxic leadership culture' and a 'wall of secrecy' (*Der Spiegel*, 18 June 2020). The isolation of the training facilities and the extensive training also contribute to an elite mentality among its members. This mentality of belonging to the 'best of the best' often leads to comparisons with the *Waffen SS*, the alleged elite unit of the German SS.

Initial Reforms

Politicians and army officials did – albeit late – undertake efforts to counter the spread of right-wing extremist worldviews within the armed forces. In 2018, the MAD improved its screening-process for new recruits, resulting in the rejection of 38 candidates within the last three years (Bartsch et. al. 2020). After the most recent incidents, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer tasked the KSK leadership to provide substantial plans for a reform of the entire unit by October 2020 or risk its dissolution. While she wanted to 'give the KSK time to press the reset button,' she also stressed that the KSK 'cannot continue to exist in its present form' and implemented a number of immediate reforms aimed specifically at breaking the 'wall of secrecy' (Scott Neuman, "Germany Disbands Elite Military Unit Following Reports of Right Wing Extremism," *NPR*, 1 July 2020). Those reforms included dissolving KSK's infamous Second Company and reassigning its members; putting the Infantry Training Center in charge of training for KSK soldiers; establishing regular communication and exchange between the KSK and other branches of the armed forces; and reforming the political and ethical education for elite troops.

However, some politicians and officials feel that these reforms do not go far enough; in particular, they point out that, despite Kramp-Karrenbauer's combative announcement, it is very unlikely that the entire KSK would be dissolved given its international cooperation projects, obligations, and overseas operations. Thus, Eva Högl, Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces, recently proposed the reintroduction of mandatory service. She argued that it would increase the democratic worldview among young Germans and make it easier to penetrate the 'wall of secrecy' by making close personal bonds within units more difficult to establish and maintain long-term. However, her proposal was met with immediate skepticism. Many felt that such a reform would take too long and would cost too much. In addition, there is no concrete proof that a mandatory army is less vulnerable to extremist infiltration than a professional army. Further objections include the fact that, due to the nature of its overseas obligations, the German military requires troops trained to the standard of a professional army, and the fact that it is easier to monitor new professional recruits rather than compulsory ones, as all citizens will at one point or another

serve in the latter, rendering in-depth monitoring impractical and expensive (Yvann Bombeke, "Wehrpflicht-Vorstoß von Eva Högl: Wenig Zuspruch viel Kritik," *Deutscher Bundeswehrverband, Blickpunk*, 6 July 2020).

What Else Should Be Done?

While lively, the current debate about a reform of the German army and its special forces misses three important points. First, during the Weimar Republic, the German *Reichswehr* enjoyed a certain autonomy within the political and social system of the German state. The soldiers were not allowed to vote and thus never developed a loyalty to the first German democracy. The *Reichswehr* was considered a 'State within the State' without any personal allegiance to the constitution or the political parties despite the oath they had sworn (Karen Schäfer,*German Military and the Weimar Republic*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2020). After Adolf Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, he quickly subordinated the German army to his will by changing its oath of allegiance. In 1934, the soldiers and officers pledged their personal loyalty to Adolf Hitler alone ('*Führereid*'), a change that provided important psychological impetus to obey orders to commit unspeakable atrocities and war crimes.

The founding fathers of the *Bundeswehr* wanted to prevent such a development at all costs. For this reason, they introduced compulsory military service and developed the concept of the 'Staatsbürger in Uniform' ('Citizen in uniform'), which became a central leitmotif of the training and education of the German soldiers in the immediate post-war era. Instead of separating the armed forces from civil society, they sought to integrate them. Soldiers were encouraged to be politically active when not on duty and were allowed to vote. During their military service, individuals would receive a political and historical education, which stressed civil rights, justice, and human dignity and would in turn enable the soldiers to reflect on their role. This kind of education and training was intended to not only benefit the armed forces, but German society at large: After completing their mandatory service, young Germans were expected to have developed a loyalty to the German democratic system and the constitution, becoming overall better citizens.

Thus, mandatory service was supposed to work both ways – a fact that is often forgotten, when politicians discuss possible reforms of the armed forces. In addition to fulfilling the military needs of the state, mandatory service should also help increase awareness and sympathy for the German democracy among young people, something that is particularly important when right-wing extremism is on the rise. Yet, the chances that compulsory service will be reintroduced anytime soon are very slim, given that leading politicians of the major parties, including Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), oppose it. Nevertheless, politicians continue to discuss alternatives in order to (re-)introduce some form of regular communication between the armed forces and civilians. Kramp-Karrenbauer has recently announced the "Your year for Germany" campaign to recruit volunteers for a year into the German army. The program should be launched in April 2021.

Second, Gramm's statements and the implemented reforms were the first time that officials and politicians at least indirectly acknowledged right-wing extremism within the armed forces as something more than the isolated actions of a problematic few. While this shows that the infiltration of the army by the radical right has been systematically underestimated, we should not forget that this kind of perception is not different from how right-wing extremism and terrorism in general are traditionally viewed. Right-wing terrorist acts have often been portrayed as "single" cases, committed by an isolated "lone wolf" perpetrator. However, networks between right-wing terrorist and extremist organizations have always existed and are not limited to Germany. The notorious American Neo-Nazi Lauck, for example, financially supported West German right-wing extremists in the 1970s and 1980s (Sebastian Gräfe, *Rechtsterrorismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Zwischen erlebnisorientierten Jugendlichen, "Feierabendterroristen" und klandestinen Untergrundzellen*; Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2017, 89-90). In Italy, the right-wing terrorists had close links to the secret service, the police, and the army during the 'strategy of tension' in the 1970s. And today, we just have to look at the United States to find another example of the close connection between police forces and right-wing paramilitary groups (Sam Levin, "White supremacists and militias have infiltrated police across US, report says" The Guardian, 27 August 2020). Thus, reforms can only be effective if they take into account these (transnational) networks and dismiss the false assumption that we deal primarily with isolated cases.

And third, structural reforms are desperately needed. The political and ethical training has to be improved, the tools

to remove right-wing extremists from service strengthened, and the MAD, whose main task until now has been – according to a high-ranking general –‘preventing bad press about the *Bundeswehr* rather than uncovering right-wing structures,’ has to show more transparency. In addition, the MAD needs more employees, in order to carry out better screening and background checks for new candidates. This is particularly important, in a time when the number of young people attracted by the promises of the far right is increasing.

These reforms would temporarily make the right-wing infiltration of the armed forces more difficult; however, it would be naïve to assume that they would put an end to it. Like a band-aid, they cover up the ‘wound’ and subdue the symptoms, but do not really challenge the causes. A more effective and permanent approach would be to treat right-wing extremism within the *Bundeswehr* in general and the KSK in particular as part of a much bigger picture: the increasing attraction of right-wing extremism within German society as a whole. Recent cases of right-wing radicals among the police forces, Neo-Nazi protests in front of the Reichstag Building in Berlin and the popularity of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* among policemen and soldiers are a case in point. Thus, to counter right-wing extremism within the armed forces, a much broader strategy that takes into account the rise of right-wing extremism in all aspects of German life is required.

About the author:

Tobias Hof is Privatdozent for Modern History at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich.