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Missing Links or Left Behind? Reassessing Research on the Bundeswehr's Military Capabilities and Operational History

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ABSTRACT

Reports about lacking operational readiness have haunted the German Armed Forces ever since the core mission reverted to collective defence. New research even suggests that deficits in conventional warfighting capability emerged long before this shift in strategic focus. The Bundeswehr's operational history however has, unlike other topics, not yet been sufficiently addressed from this changed perspective. This research note therefore argues that more attention on issues pertaining to military capabilities is warranted and makes the case that scholars will find both academic and practical relevance in the pursuit of such research.

Introduction

When historians think of German soldiers using mock-weapons for training, they would most likely recall the Reichswehr's attempts to bypass armament restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, rather than the Bundeswehr's recent lack of resources.¹ Reports about broomsticks used in place of vehicle-mounted heavy machine guns on Exercise Cold Response 2014 in Norway however made international headlines and are regarded as a low point of the German military's operational readiness.² For an

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¹For historical background on the Reichswehr see Matthias Strohn, *The German Army and the Defence of the Reich: Military Doctrine and the Conduct of the Defensive Battle 1918-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²While the German Ministry of Defence (*Bundesministerium der Verteidigung*) denied that lack of equipment played a role in this incident, the matter has been widely reported, not least due to corroborating evidence in other official reports. The specific example regularly resurfaces, most recently for example as the introductory thought to Constantin Wißmann's book *Bedingt einsatzbereit: Wie die Bundeswehr zur* www.bjmh.org.uk

REASSESSING RESEARCH ON THE BUNDESWEHR'S CAPABILITIES

army that was once praised as a formidable fighting force during the Cold War, this seems like a significant fall from grace. What could have caused this decline? Academics and defence experts today point quickly to the military reforms of the early 2010s formalised in the *Verteidigungspolitischen Richtlinien* (Defence Policy Guidelines, DPG) from 2011.³ These introduced a definitive shift away from conventional high-intensity operations towards an increased focus on out-of-area deployments. In this context, the Bundeswehr also adopted a structure which was characterised by what has been called a leaner order of battle. The corresponding *Neuausrichtung der Bundeswehr*, which also encompassed the suspension of compulsory military service, was certainly an ambitious approach and has left a lasting mark on the German Armed Forces.⁴ However, the Bundeswehr had already undergone considerable changes prior to that. This research note therefore argues that a substantial part of these current issues can be traced back to the decade that followed the end of the Cold War and finds that from today's perspective, a reassessment of the German military transformation since that time is merited.

The years after the fall of the Iron Curtain presented the Bundeswehr with a variety of challenges. These included the integration of the East German *Nationale Volksarmee* and the hasty reduction in manpower and weapon systems to comply with the Two Plus Four Agreement after German reunification.⁵ Several deliberate defence policy processes, such as those of the DPG from 1992 or later the *Weizsäcker-Kommission*, further sought to address the tension between a Cold War structure of the Bundeswehr within a changed security context. While far-reaching, the measures did not explicitly abandon collective national defence as the main task of the Bundeswehr, even though this was a hotly debated topic in the political domain, for example

Schrottmee wurde, (München: Riva Verlag, 2019), pp. 11-16. The unhelpfully sensationalist title references readiness problems in the early Cold War and the Spiegel affair of 1962.

³The DPG lay out the conceptual basis of German defence policy and activities in the *Bundesministerium der Verteidigung* and are republished irregularly. For context on the DPG of 2011 see Reinhard Mutz, 'De Maizières Verteidigungspolitische Richtlinien: Wendepunkt für die Bundeswehr oder alter Wein in neuen Schläuchen?', in Reinhard Mutz and Sabine Jaberg (eds.), *Schießen wie die anderen?: Beiträge für eine friedensverträgliche Sicherheits- und eine sicherheitsverträgliche Friedenspolitik*, (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019), pp. 239-241.

⁴Joachim Hesse, *Die Neuausrichtung der Bundeswehr: Ansatz, Umsetzung und Ergebnisse im nationalen und internationalen Vergleich*, (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015), p. 211.

⁵For the history of the dissolution of East German defence structures see Frederick Zilian, *From Confrontation to Cooperation: The Takeover of the National People's (East German) Army by the Bundeswehr*, (Westport: Praeger, 1999) and Jörg Schönbohm, *Zwei Armeen und ein Vaterland: Das Ende der Nationalen Volksarmee*, (Berlin: Siedler, 1992).

between then Defence Minister Volker Rühle and Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel.⁶ Nevertheless, reports of shortcomings on these obligations soon made their way through the chain of command, as the latest research by Sönke Neitzel's shows. By 2001, the German military leadership had assured knowledge not only about lacking operational readiness of entire units or availability of sophisticated weapon systems such as aircraft and naval vessels, but also about deficiencies that ultimately concerned everyday military activities, such as ammunition shortages for training purposes.⁷ A critical deterioration of the readiness of conventional military capabilities that cannot be explained solely by the political dimension of the post-Cold War reforms had clearly taken place. With the emphasis on out-of-area deployments, these deficiencies were tolerated and the limited deployments in places such as Afghanistan seemed to suggest that the Bundeswehr could adapt successfully even with a general lack of material and personnel. The flaws only became publicly obvious when the pendulum swung back to collective defence after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) 2014 Wales Summit Declaration in reaction to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The current operational realities of the Bundeswehr could be well addressed by scholarship in military history. Pertinent research topics may include operational performance, procurement efficiency, transformation and learning processes, and implementation of adaptations in force structure. At present however, there is not enough work on these issues that a definitive history of the Bundeswehr's operational readiness can be conclusively established. Of course, this should by no means suggest that the Bundeswehr or the history of German defence and security policy are neglected by the academic community. Research on topics ranging from political-military affairs to social issues has been extensive as will be shown in this note. This is not least due to the fact that research on the Bundeswehr cuts across many academic disciplines, a constellation that characterises military history in general. Just as the field 'has diversified, mirroring developments in wider historical discussion by seeking to be a conduit for the understanding of both events and processes, rather than one or the other', related research questions about the Bundeswehr are covered from the perspectives of political science, strategic studies, law, education sciences, management studies, and even sociology.⁸ This diversity, often culminating in joint research efforts, benefits the field as a whole. As it was mentioned in the preface of the inter-disciplinary volume on the history of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in

⁶Franz-Josef Meiers, *Zu neuen Ufern? Die deutsche Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik in einer Welt des Wandels 1990-2000*, (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), p. 280.

⁷Sönke Neitzel, *Deutsche Krieger: Vom Kaiserreich zur Berliner Republik - Eine Militärgeschichte*, (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 2020), pp. 461-464, pp. 566-569.

⁸Zack White, 'Introduction: New Researchers and the Bright Future of Military History', *British Journal for Military History*, 7, 2 (2021), pp. 2-5 (p. 3).

REASSESSING RESEARCH ON THE BUNDESWEHR'S CAPABILITIES

Afghanistan 2001-2014, the amalgamation of the various discipline's 'expertise, their individual perspectives and their different methodologies and sources' must be commended.⁹

Notwithstanding these successes, gaps in research about military capabilities and operational readiness become evident on closer inspection. The decisive shift in strategic focus following the 2014 NATO summit, which exposed the German military's lack of operational readiness, has so far not led to increased attention to these aspects of the Bundeswehr's history. Of course, many publications have studied the large defence policy processes in the post-Cold War period over the years. Yet most of them either refrain from a detailed military analysis or are simply *passé* in the sense that they predate the pivotal events of 2014, after which conventional warfare turned out to be fundamentally relevant once again. Even for recent scholarship that is produced with this in mind, it is common that little emphasis is put on this perspective. As a testament, the critically acclaimed two current introductory works on the Bundeswehr, one originating from the military research domain by Rudolf Schlaffer and the other directly out of academia by Wilfried von Bredow, barely cover this period and hardly reflect on the current issues of lacking operational readiness at all.¹⁰

It would be short-sighted to blame this nuanced gap solely on the increased political and military importance of the Bundeswehr's deployments abroad, for example in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Many of those publications have assessed pertinent topics revolving around those deployments, which massively contributed towards discussions about force structure and provided insights about the Bundeswehr's capability to adapt to new challenges. Rather, the notion prevails, at least among the German academic community, that the failure to adequately address existing and emerging military issues is due to the country's strategic culture.¹¹ For background, the use of (military) force as a political tool has generally been frowned upon in German society ever since the end of the Second World War. The popularity among the German public of the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, who instead argues that all conflicts can actually be resolved

⁹Hans-Hubertus Mack, 'Preface', in Bernhard Chiari (ed.), *From Venus to Mars? Provincial Reconstruction Teams and the European Military Experience in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*, (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 2014), pp. 9-10.

¹⁰See Rudolf Schlaffer and Marina Sandig, *Die Bundeswehr 1955 bis 2015: Sicherheitspolitik und Streitkräfte in der Demokratie*, (Berlin: Rombach Verlag, 2015); Wilfried von Bredow, *Die Geschichte der Bundeswehr*, (Berlin: Palm Verlag, 2017).

¹¹Heiko Biehl, 'Zwischen Bündnistreue und militärischer Zurückhaltung: Die strategische Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland', in Ines-Jacqueline Werkner and Michael Haspel (eds.), *Bündnissolidarität und ihre friedensethischen Kontroversen*, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), pp. 37-58 (pp. 44-45).

through communication and without forceful measures, is a testament to this.¹² This manifests itself in a peculiar, partly dysfunctional relationship of society with the Armed Forces and, as Oxford political scientist Andrew Hurrell determined, 'is inexplicable outside of the social, political and historical consciousness of Germany'.¹³ Even the long and extensive political-military commitments abroad to Afghanistan, did not jumpstart a more nuanced discussion, as researchers once hoped. On the contrary, particularly the Bundeswehr's out-of-area deployments remain controversial, and veterans regularly bemoan society's dismissal of issues related to this.¹⁴

This sentiment has left a lasting mark on German academia as well. More generally, it prevented the establishment of disciplines that are closely associated with the topic of war. Through what is best described by Max Hastings' observation of the currently popular yet misguided notion that the study of war implies a certain approval of it, disciplines inherently connected to the military could never thrive in Germany as they did in other parts of the world.¹⁵ For the case of strategic studies (*Strategielehre*) and operational history (*Operationsgeschichte*), this has been well observed.¹⁶ Further considering that the international war studies programme at the University of Potsdam is the only one of its kind in the country, the perspective looks bleak for the discipline of war studies and military history as well. The higher education landscape in Germany rather tends to be dominated by degrees in peace and conflict studies, which have a not insignificantly different curriculum and research focus. Ultimately, the reluctance to engage with operational history and military capabilities is even evident in research that deliberately deals with topics related to the Bundeswehr. For German publications it is a regular occurrence that they purposefully restrict themselves to topics outside of the analysis of the military as a fighting organisation or reflect

¹²See Jürgen Habermas, trs. Thomas McCarthy, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

¹³Cited from Maximilian Terhalle, 'Strategie und Strategielehre', *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik*, 11, 1 (2018), pp. 83-100 (p. 86).

¹⁴Marcel Bohnert, 'Ich war für Deutschland im Krieg: Ein Afghanistan-Rückkehrer berichtet', *Der Spiegel*, 7 August 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/afghanistan-ich-war-in-einem-krieg-den-es-nicht-geben-durfte-a-dd795eba-0002-0001-0000-000178686056>. Accessed 12 August 2021.

¹⁵Max Hastings, 'American Universities Declare War on Military History', *Bloomberg*, 31 January 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-01-31/max-hastings-u-s-universities-declare-war-on-military-history>. Accessed 6 August 2021.

¹⁶For operational history see Stig Förster, 'Operationsgeschichte heute: Eine Einführung', *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 61, 2 (2002), pp. 309-314; For strategic studies see Terhalle, 'Strategie und Strategielehre', pp. 83-100.

REASSESSING RESEARCH ON THE BUNDESWEHR'S CAPABILITIES

excessively critical on the role of the forces.¹⁷ The purpose of this research note is of course not to dismiss the importance of historical-critical reconstruction or depict existing and future work in other domains as unwarranted. Rather, the argument remains that works about these issues are oftentimes only partially useful in developing research about operational history of (conventional) military capabilities. Since German-language publications dominate the field, this exacerbates the need for detailed research on issues of operational readiness.

At this point though, it is necessary to point out the body of scholarship that already exists in this domain and on which future research may build upon. Over the years, researchers from many fields have produced relevant empirical work on the post-Cold War transformation of the Bundeswehr. These include historians who have studied the effects of the end of the Cold War on the European militaries, political scientists who used the changing global security landscape as an occasion to shed light on Germany's defence and security policy, and many more scholars who explored specialist topics from various angles beyond the realm of military history. In essence, four different backgrounds to these sources can be found. First, there are influential individual researchers in academia who are interested in this research focus. Representative for them is the previously mentioned Sönke Neitzel, who chairs the war studies programme at Potsdam. His latest work on the social history of the Bundeswehr includes meticulous research on the operational aspects of the forces and has gained popular attention in Germany.¹⁸ Secondly, many relevant research activities are based at the Centre for Military History and the Social Sciences (*Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr*, ZMSBw), which emerged from the Military History Research Office (*Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt*) and the Bundeswehr Institute for Social Sciences (*Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr*) in 2013. Through the funding of the German Ministry of Defence and privileged access to archives and military documents, essential contributions to post-Cold War military change and the operational history of the Bundeswehr have been produced over the years. The impressive list of affiliated scholars includes not only experts specialising in current missions such as Philipp Münch on Afghanistan.¹⁹ Many researchers writing on German defence and security policy more generally, such as

¹⁷See Detlef Bald, *Die Bundeswehr: Eine kritische Geschichte 1955-2005*, (s.l.: C.H. Beck, 2005).

¹⁸See Neitzel, *Deutsche Krieger*.

¹⁹See Philipp Münch, *Die Bundeswehr in Afghanistan: Militärische Handlungslogik in internationalen Interventionen*, (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 2015); On this topic also see Carolin Hilpert, *Strategic Cultural Change and the Challenge for Security Policy: Germany and the Bundeswehr's Deployment to Afghanistan*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Ina Kraft and Heiko Biehl, can also be found here.²⁰ Thirdly, the numerous specialised works on conventional military capabilities usually involve research outside the classical field of military history or even the social sciences altogether. An interesting example is the contributions of economics and management studies to defence and operational readiness issues at various points in the Bundeswehr reforms during the last 30 years.²¹ Finally, the role that international authors assume in the field is particularly noteworthy. While the modern German military has so far not attracted as much attention as those militaries of the past such as the Imperial Army or the Wehrmacht, they contribute high-quality scholarship to all aspects of the Bundeswehr, and it was mainly these authors who studied important operational aspects and strategic considerations. Research efforts include both original research about the Bundeswehr and comparison with other militaries in NATO or the European security architecture.²² These are well-suited to address the shortcomings identified thus far and prove that the Bundeswehr as a research subject is by no means reserved for German academia.

All in all, the evidence gathered in this research note affirms that greater and more current consideration of the Bundeswehr's operational history is warranted. The research context lastly suggests two main reasons why the pursuit of this looks promising: First, the academic and practical relevance of the research topic cannot be understated. The need for Western militaries to address questions about operational readiness is as high as ever now that they decisively align force structures and core tasks towards collective defence and near-peer level conflicts. Scholars contributing

²⁰See Ina Wiesner, *German Defence Politics*, (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2013); Ina Kraft, 'Germany', in Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss (eds.), *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 52-70; Heiko Biehl, *Die neue Bundeswehr: Wege und Probleme der Anpassung der deutschen Streitkräfte an die außen- und sicherheitspolitischen Herausforderungen nach dem Ende des Kalten Krieges*, (Strausberg: Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr, 1998).

²¹See Wolfgang Heydrich (ed.), *Die Bundeswehr am Beginn einer neuen Epoche: Anforderungen an die Streitkräfte und ihre rüstungsindustrielle Basis*, (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1996); Gregor Richter (ed.), *Neuausrichtung der Bundeswehr: Beiträge zur professionellen Führung und Steuerung*, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012).

²²See Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, *Germany, Pacifism and Peace Enforcement*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Tom Dyson, *The Politics of German Defense and Security: Policy Leadership and Military Reform in the Post-Cold War Era*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); Tom Dyson, *Organisational Learning and the Modern Army: A New Model for Lessons-Learned Processes*, (London: Routledge, 2020); Tom Dyson, 'The Challenge of Creating an Adaptive Bundeswehr', *German Politics*, 30, 1 (2021), pp. 122-139; Kerry Longhurst, *Germany and the Use of Force: The Evolution of German Security Policy 1990-2003*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

REASSESSING RESEARCH ON THE BUNDESWEHR'S CAPABILITIES

to these issues from today's perspective will not only be at the spearhead of academic research, they can also be sure to achieve a high level of practical relevance. Historical-critical reconstruction of the defence activities during the last three decades may for example result in an understanding of how (un)successful proposed reforms factually were or lead to a better understanding of how certain capabilities which are relied upon today, such as close air defence, mine laying and long-range reconnaissance were once lost in the process. The result of such post-mortem analysis will be of significant interest to defence planners today since the institutional memory of the armed forces should embrace all possible lessons learned in order to be prepared for the next period of war or peacetime.²³ Given that many other disciplines in the broader field of military innovation studies take up similar research questions, the contributions of history with its relevant strengths should not be overlooked. Secondly, research in this field is encouraged by the substantial academic groundwork and the diversity of sources. This is where the Bundeswehr, as a research topic at the crossroads of various disciplines, can play to its strengths. Original research so far includes a great volume of both qualitative interviews with contemporary witnesses and extensive analysis of documents and archives with the aim of reliably tracing defence processes or producing quantitative data. The possibilities to expand on the existing foundations is growing, both by the availability of military documents such as internal reports or deployment logs, and the willingness of the German Ministry of Defence to accommodate academic research.²⁴ The increase in insight from stakeholders during pivotal times in Germany's defence policy reorganisation decisions, who increasingly enter the phase of reflecting on their careers through autobiographies or other publications, should further contribute to this. In this context, the utilisation of these sources should not be limited to any scientific discipline alone. Rather, scholars across the wider field of military innovation studies can draw on common references and engage in fruitful cooperation over individual or joint research projects. Finally, as these trends continue, the history of the Bundeswehr's operational readiness is bound to gain relevance apart from institutional interests and present defence policy challenges. After all, the fall of the Iron Curtain did not manifest itself to be the end of conventional military operations as most defence planners at the time envisioned.

²³For the current relevance of a military institutional memory with regard to the contemporary operational environment see Matthias Strohn, 'Threshold, Sub-Threshold: We Have Been Here Before or 'New Wine in old Bottles'', *Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research*, 15 April 2021 <https://chacr.org.uk/2021/04/15/threshold-sub-thresholdwe-have-been-here-before-or-new-wine-in-old-bottles-2/>. Accessed 29 April 2021.

²⁴Bernhard Chiari, 'Die Bundeswehr als Zauberlehrling der Politik? Der ISAF-Einsatz und das Provincial Reconstruction Team Kunduz 2003 bis 2012', *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 72, 2 (2013), pp. 317-352 (p. 320).