



## Will the Germans defend themselves<sup>1</sup>

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### Summary

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Some of Germany's neighbours have doubts. Would the Germans defend themselves in the event of an attack? If so, with what motivation and what social support? The changed realities of deployment and the expanded understanding of security have long called for an identity for Bundeswehr soldiers that goes beyond the traditional citizen in uniform: an identity that enables and includes various forms of democratic self-determination in global society by limiting and containing war and violence. The concept of the "democratic warrior" could achieve this. It describes a social figure with the potential to overcome the tension between civil society and the reality of deployment.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on considerations that Andreas Herberg-Rothe and Ralph Thiele set out in 2011 in their article "Vom Staatsbürger in Uniform zum Demokratischen Krieger". Vorgänge 193: Militär und Demokratie 03/2011, Seiten 27-35.



## Analysis

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### Foreign war

War has become alien to the Germans. That's a good thing! As long as you don't have to go to war. In recent decades, the idea of Germans dying, and sometimes killing, in a faraway country, in a miserable place, so that other people could live in safety and peace, has seemed almost unthinkable in Germany.

For many in German society, the German soldier was and remains above all the soldier of the Second World War. There has been no coherent vision within the Bundeswehr of the professional profile of a modern, democratic soldier – and perhaps there should not have been, given the complexities of German post-war history.

On the other hand, for the men and women in the field, these questions are very real, full of concrete elements and countless emotions. Like the members of their families, they have to find a way every day to bridge two fundamentally incompatible worlds: the reality of war in the field and the reality of peace at home.

### Tide change

The security challenges in and for Europe stem from a wide range of competing geostrategic data, including multiple hybrid threat scenarios, attacks on critical enterprises and infrastructure, or the risk of protracted low-intensity or even high-intensity conflicts. The tide change has now been brutally enforced. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is a striking sign of a fundamentally changed security situation and fundamentally changed requirements for German soldiers and German society, firmly anchored in the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance.

However, the current explosive situation in Ukraine should not obscure the fact that geostrategic competition is global. The boundaries between civilian and military competition are becoming blurred. Russia and China, in particular, are integrating civil and military competition at all levels, such as the development of their international trade, their investments, their national technological bases, and their political and diplomatic activities.

In addition to Russia and China, Iran remains a major challenge to stability in Europe's neighbourhood. It blatantly promotes violence and terror in the Middle East. This is not only a threat to peace and stability in the region. The reach of terrorist groups extends to the whole of Europe. Turkey also has a problematic foreign and security policy.

### New face of war

The future operational environment will be increasingly characterised by a blurring of the boundaries between internal and external warfare – between states and civil war – and between the role of civilian forces and that of the military. It appears more dynamic and complex than ever before. Traditional mass armies no longer stand a chance against networked forces that are modern, well-trained and yet much smaller. Small, powerful, highly mobile and flexible communities and combat units are increasingly driving operational developments. Fundamentally new operational concepts are becoming possible. Agility at strategic, operational and tactical levels is taking on new dimensions.

In this context, the classical image of war is becoming largely obsolete. It is being replaced by a global security picture in which the armed forces play a smaller but qualitatively broader role among the actors in security policy. The combination of different perspectives from foreign policy, economic policy, development policy,



justice policy, domestic policy and defence policy increasingly requires a comprehensive approach to the planning and implementation of conflict resolution. Economies and societies are not only the targets of malicious attacks. They also have to face them together. Their collective resilience is needed to withstand events that cause stress and shock. Their collective action is needed to effectively combat the causes and consequences of complex conflict or crisis scenarios.

As the security instruments available to the state, the armed forces are part of the spectrum of societal response capabilities. They must be prepared to be used in conjunction and synchronisation with other civilian policy instruments as part of a comprehensive response to security challenges. Broad societal acceptance of this self-understanding is the backbone of social reconnection and legitimacy.

### A new link

Until the 1990s, peacekeeping was the real challenge. The image of the soldier was that of the citizen in uniform, at heart a civilian, firmly attached to the foundations of democracy and freedom, which he would defend if necessary. In this way, the "civility" of the armed forces came to the fore – the soldier as peacemaker, builder of wells and bridges.

"Innere Führung", the leadership concept of the Bundeswehr, and its visible identification with the "citizen in uniform" have characterised the Bundeswehr since its inception. The Bundeswehr has become an organic part of the democratic rule of law and a living part of society. The soldier had to perform his military duties in a professional manner, while at the same time being a committed democratic citizen.

The new operational realities and the broadening concept of security require the soldiers of the Bundeswehr to redefine their identity, which includes but does not end with the citizen in uniform: an identity that, by limiting and containing war and violence, enables and contains various forms of democratic self-determination in global society.

The concept of the "democratic warrior" describes a social figure with the potential to overcome the tension between civil society and the reality of operations. Indeed, the link between society, its armed forces and other security agencies is growing stronger every day. Democratic warriors see themselves as citizen-soldiers of a liberal democracy. They act on behalf of the Federal Republic of Germany under the primacy of politics. They possess republican virtues and – as instruments of politics – a warrior ethic that enables them to use violence as a last resort to contain and limit other forms of violence.

Such a concept of the "democratic warrior" could counteract the subliminal erosion of the uniformed citizen, while bridging the tension between civil society and the reality of operations. Honour, virtues and ideals enable them to navigate ethically and morally difficult terrain. Prudence (wisdom), justice, courage and temperance have been the classical virtues since Plato. Without a specific ethic aimed at the political functioning of the community, a state can only survive under conditions of dictatorship. Republican virtue focuses on the community and serves as a link between democratic society and democratic warriors. In addition, it limits war and violence in global society in order to make democratic societies possible. Once again, a renewed republican virtue [b17] forms the link between liberal democratic society and a warrior ethic.

At first glance, 'honour', 'virtues' or 'ideals' seem to be relics of a bygone era in a postmodern society. But in an institution like the Bundeswehr, the concept of honour is once again in vogue. This is because the reality of the



Bundeswehr's operational commitment undermines the model of the citizen in uniform associated with the concept of honour.

Society's lack of interest in the Bundeswehr and society's lack of recognition of the soldier in action encourage the development towards the isolation of an autonomous and self-referential identity of the "fighter", who creates recognition for himself by his own means of understanding. Even a "democratic warrior", as a true soldier in combat, needs social recognition of his identity in order to be solid and viable, both militarily and socially. In this context, the media staging of deployment, combat and war is understood as a means of preventing this isolation by offering recognised identifications.

### Has German society understood?

The abolition of compulsory military service in Germany in 2011, after 55 years, was certainly a step towards distancing society from its armed forces. The change of era has largely brought Germans and their armed forces closer together again. Since then, there have been discussions not only about a return to compulsory military service, but also about a year's compulsory service in the Bundeswehr or in the social sector. Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier kicked off the debate last year when he introduced the idea of a general compulsory service. According to Steinmeier, it would be good for Germany if men and women served society for a certain period of time.

According to a major ZDF survey, almost three out of four Germans are in favour. At 77 %, support is particularly high among the over-70s. Among the under-30s, however, the figure was 64 %. 82% of respondents said they thought it was a good idea for someone to join the Bundeswehr. However, only 48 % would be prepared to risk their lives to defend Germany. 42 % would not be prepared to take up arms themselves. According to Defence Minister Pistorius, one of the reasons for this is that the Bundeswehr has 'disappeared from view' for too long.

However, the fact that not even one in two people is prepared to personally take part in Germany's defence is due to the daily images from Ukraine. This shows how important it is to restore republican virtues. Perhaps we could create a European model? A European democratic warrior?

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**Remarks:** The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. The article will appear in a slightly modified version in the French "Revue Administration" in July 2024.



### About the Author of this Issue

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