



German History in Documents and Images

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Germany and its Citizens in Uniform (November 15, 2009)

This German-based reporter for *New York Times* describes the distant relationship between the German public and members of the German armed forces. He contrasts Germany with the U.S., where soldiers enjoy broad public support.

No Parade for Hans

BERLIN — Often, as I have passed through the main train station here in the German capital, I have seen the sad, lone figure of a soldier, heavy pack on his back, waiting for a train like the rest of us, but separated from the crowd by the uniform he wears. No one would stop to thank him for his service or to ask whether he had been deployed to Afghanistan.

The loneliness was obvious, but at times I even sensed what I thought might have been fear, at the occasional hostile looks the soldier would receive alongside the impassiveness of the broader masses on the platform, who just tried to pretend he wasn't there.

In Afghanistan recently, where German troops are engaged in ground combat the likes of which their military hasn't seen since World War II, I described my impressions of the home front to a group of soldiers from a reconnaissance company.

A staff sergeant, who had been risking his life almost daily outside Kunduz, recalled a trip to Berlin during which he was wearing his uniform at a train stop. He was told to make himself scarce or he would be beaten up.

"It was shocking," said the sergeant, Marcel B., who, according to German military rules, could not be fully identified. "We're looked down on. With American soldiers, they tell me how they receive recognition, how people just come up to them and say they're doing good."

Last Wednesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel became the first German leader to mark the armistice that ended World War I with French officials in Paris.

It was one more sign of how far her country had come in repairing relationships with its former enemies, now its allies and partners. In fact, Germany carries the European sensibility about

war — forged out of centuries of violence and in particular the 20th century's devastation — even beyond where the French, the British, the Dutch and others do.

Instead of marking Veterans Day or Armistice Day on Nov. 11, Germany on Sunday observes *Volkstrauertag*, its national day of mourning for soldiers and civilians alike who died in war, as well as for victims of violent oppression. German society has a complicated relationship with war, due to the Nazi era. The result has been a generally pacifist bent and an opposition to most armed conflicts; that includes majority opposition to the Afghanistan mission, which often expresses itself as a mistrust of those in uniform.

In this, there is a profound contrast to current attitudes in the United States, where even opponents of recent military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken pains to express support for the ordinary soldier who has been sent to fight and perhaps die.

The German men and women in Afghanistan set off for war without the support of the populace, and they know that when they return there won't be crowds cheering in the streets, ready to make heroes of them. Germany has turned its back on hero worship. The soldiers fight alone.

"This sense of appreciation, you don't get that, the feeling that wearing your uniform people are going to be proud of you," said Heike Groos, who has written about her time as a German military doctor in Afghanistan. "Young people die. Young people are badly wounded and one feels out of place and lonely when one thinks, 'No one in Germany understands and no one in Germany is even interested'."

The German military was revived in the 1950's as a linchpin in the NATO barrier to Soviet expansion, but it was limited to a defensive role. Although they trained and took part in disaster assistance, German forces did not face combat until taking part in NATO's Balkan campaigns in the 1990s. Now the German military is trying to come to terms with the radically different realities facing the professional soldiers in combat in Afghanistan (conscripts can be sent only if they voluntarily extend their service).

In July, Mrs. Merkel awarded four German soldiers who served in Afghanistan the first medals for bravery the country had given since World War II. In September, President Horst Köhler opened a memorial here in Berlin to all those who have died while in military service since 1955.

Daniel Libeskind, the architect of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, is redesigning the former East German military museum in Dresden to be used as the main military history museum of Germany's military, the Bundeswehr.

And last week, Germany's new defense minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, traveled to Afghanistan, where he told the troops: "I believe that our common fatherland can be proud of you. I know that I am."

But such official recognition of the changing circumstances is not the same as a broader acceptance in society.

“Support the troops” can start to sound like a hollow mantra until you live in a country that just doesn’t do it. In the United States, the little flags in store windows, the bumper stickers, the yellow ribbons around tree trunks and hanging on doors — not to mention the sense of national mourning that President Obama addressed last week after the mass shooting of soldiers at Fort Hood — weave together to form a kind of psychological safety net for soldiers.

To this American, the talk show hosts’ and football announcers’ greetings to the soldiers had begun to sound a bit obligatory until I returned from Afghanistan and started really paying attention to German television, hoping to catch just one similar gesture. So far I haven’t.

In the Vietnam era, the divisions within American society over the war meant that returning soldiers in uniform faced epithets from protesters. But a consensus has since emerged that decision makers should take the heat for war policies, and young men and women in uniform should be supported for the risks they undertake on behalf of the country.

Reinhold Robbe, the German Parliament’s military commissioner, said he remained impressed by the memory of seeing on trips to Tampa and Washington and El Paso that “complete strangers are buying soldiers beer.”

“There’s no real empathy in Germany toward the soldiers who risk life and limb every day,” said Mr. Robbe, 55.

Mr. Robbe’s own experiences track Germany’s complex mix of attitudes toward its postwar military. He refused to serve as a young man, saying he did not understand why he should shoot at relatives in East Germany. But as a member of Parliament in 1995 he became one of several dozen Social Democrats to cross party lines to support the Bosnia mission. As a result, his face ended up on posters with the words “the warmongers,” and Mr. Robbe found himself under police protection.

That was a time of open pacifism; what has taken its place is something different. “Compared to those days, we’re a bit farther along, a bit more used to it,” Mr. Robbe said. “But one basically leaves it in Parliament’s hands, and really wants nothing to do with it, and the soldier doesn’t get the moral support that he has earned.”

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