

Detlef Bald. *Die Bundeswehr: Eine kritische Geschichte 1955-2005.* München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2005. 232 S. EUR 12.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-406-52792-0.



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Normal or Not?

The publication of Detlef Bald's "critical history" of the West German armed forces coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Bundeswehr in 1955. Germany's "new Wehrmacht," Bald reminds us, was founded amidst lingering doubts about Germany's trustworthiness internationally and vocal (if not universal) opposition to rearmament domestically. Would the German military again threaten its neighbors? Would the young West German democracy be able to control its armed forces? Would the Bundeswehr, its officer corps initially staffed by men who had sworn an oath to Adolf Hitler, be able to overcome the legacy of Germany's military past?

It is helpful to be reminded that the outcome was not a foregone conclusion in 1955. Like the Federal Republic itself, the Bundeswehr traveled on a road littered with hazards. Echoing the questions posed at the outset, Bald argues that three themes—democracy, internationalization and relationship to history (*Geschichtsbezug*)—have defined the Bundeswehr throughout its existence. In each area, the Bundeswehr has faced, and not always overcome, distinct challenges. Bald's history pits the

fragile institutions of West German democracy against the latent threat of a conservative military structure and its traditionalist, anti-democratic worldview.

In Bald's view, the Bundeswehr has consistently blocked efforts at democratic reform. A military leadership drawn from Hitler's army in 1955 quickly emasculated Wolf Graf von Baudissin's early internal leadership concept (*Innere Führung*), which was aimed at introducing democratic principles of command into the Bundeswehr. Over the course of decades, the Bundeswehr fought to insulate itself against social and political pressures to reform, with the result that as late as 1994, the future Inspector-General of the Bundeswehr, Hartmut Bagger, could proclaim that "the military and civil society are governed by a 'different hierarchy of values, models, norms and behaviors'" (p. 156). For Bald, such statements are evidence of the persistence of the "state within a state" tradition that stretches at least back to Hans von Seeckt's Reichswehr of the 1920s and even to the institutions of the nineteenth-century Prussian General Staff.

Nor has the Bundeswehr always been a contented member of the Western defense community. The Bun-

deswehr pushed hard for intervention after the Soviets raised the Berlin Wall in 1961. In the most potentially spectacular instance, a Bundeswehr commander in Regensburg mobilized his division for action against Soviet forces entering Prague in the summer of 1968, contrary to NATO orders against intervention (p. 74). The division returned to its base, but only after a NATO bomber squadron had been dispatched in its direction. The Bundeswehr establishment consistently favored the acquisition and battlefield use of nuclear weapons no matter the policy of the Bonn government or Germany's allies (p. 121). NATO's 1991 decision effectively to dismantle its tactical nuclear arsenal rankled (p. 128). Despite such aggressiveness, for much of its history, the Bundeswehr was ranked as only marginally ready to face the challenge of a Soviet invasion.

The Bundeswehr's troubled relationship with the past is well known. Bald, whose own work on educational and recruitment systems shows through here, criticizes the Bundeswehr for its preference for traditional discipline and training. The West German military elite idolized the Wehrmacht for its pure military functionality [sic!] and has consistently modeled its own structures on those of Hitler's army. For most of its history, and like its predecessors, the West German military has recruited from among fairly narrow segments of society and has usually denigrated liberal educational achievements in favor of certain personal qualities embodied in the term "character." The result has been scandals such as the incident on the Iller river in 1957 when fifteen soldiers drowned during a training exercise. One minor flaw of the work is that incidents such as "Nagold" or "Iller" are included as evidence of the Bundeswehr's fondness for traditional discipline without much elaboration (p. 66). Bald links the lack of liberal education among officers to the prevalence of right-wing sentiments and even occasional outbursts of violence among rank-and-file soldiers. It should come as no surprise that the Bundeswehr reacted energetically against the exhibit "Vernichtungskrieg," which laid bare the many crimes committed by the Wehrmacht during the Second World War and thereby challenged the Bundeswehr's fundamental tenet that the Wehrmacht

had merely performed its military duty (p. 154).

Helmut Schmidt—first as Defense Minister for Willy Brandt (1969-72) and then as Chancellor (1974-82)—made the most progress in "normalizing" the Bundeswehr. Under his leadership, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) was able, at least briefly, to institute reforms aimed at modernizing the Bundeswehr and improving civil-military relations more generally. But reaction never lurked far beneath the surface. Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic regime undermined Schmidt's reforms and generally supported the anti-pluralist, militaristic demands of the Bundeswehr establishment on the

Hardth. Despite these problems, Bald maintains throughout that the Bundeswehr has become "normal"—has been integrated into the pluralistic, democratic society of Germany (p. 14, p. 97). A "new German military has come into being," one in which "civility, internationalism, and democratic conformity are valued" (p. 188). But despite this hopeful conclusion and as in his other publications on the subject, Bald sees no room for complacency.[1]

A new round of reforms initiated in 2002 has again roiled the waters of civil-military relations in Germany. Germans today face challenges as their armed forces engage in the process of "transformation" (it is perhaps telling that the Bundeswehr uses the American term), a process with deep ramifications for society and one that can be understood in terms of the three themes Bald carries through his work. A Bundeswehr that gradually abandons universal military service, integrates with other European forces and increasingly seeks missions outside its borders raises similar questions about democracy, internationalization and history as did the Bundeswehr of 1955, which wrestled with *Innere Führung*, the confines of NATO and the legacy of the Wehrmacht.

Note

[1]. Detlev Bald, *Militär und Gesellschaft. Die Bundeswehr der Bonner Republik* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1994). The book under review is in some ways an updated version of this earlier work.

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