

Combat-Ready?

On the Mental Mobilisation in Germany

Since the war in Ukraine began in February 2022, Germany has undergone a security policy turning point. Then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD) spoke of a “Zeitenwende” (a historic turning point), rushed billion-euro rearmament programs into action, and developed a fundamental political reorientation: Germany is to become “combat-ready,” as Defence Minister Boris Pistorius put it in the fall of 2023. This term marks a deep incision in the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany, especially since Foreign Minister Waidepohl defined the enemy image with the words, ‘Russia will always remain our enemy.’

The Return of Military Thinking

“Combat-readiness” is a term laden with historical weight. It hails from a time when nations justified their existence through readiness for war. In the Federal Republic, this expression was taboo for decades—a relic of authoritarian, militaristic times. Defence Minister Pistorius now speaks of military resilience, ammunition reserves, and NATO compatibility. The Nazis also used the term in efforts to circumvent the military restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles.

This semantic shift has consequences. Incorporating terms like “combat-ready” into everyday political language alters the political imagination. A new guiding principle emerges: the citizen as part of a war-capable community that, in times of crisis, must be ready not only to pay, but to fight. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine* speaks of “the duty to, if necessary, lay down one’s life for the community.” Scholars from the Bundeswehr University in Hamburg recommend “graduated use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield” for military conflict, thus effectively advocating the first nuclear strike. The Bundeswehr is not only being technically upgraded, but also culturally revalorised: it is to become the heart of a new “national responsibility.” This represents a step backwards for civilisation.

The Shift in Discourse

This transformation is not limited to the Bundeswehr. It affects the entire political and media discourse. Those who question arms deliveries to Kyiv now quickly find themselves under pressure to justify their stance. Peace appeals - like those voiced by Alice Schwarzer or Sahra Wagenknecht in 2023 - were met with vicious insults. Anti-war demonstrations are broadly discredited as a “Querfront” (a red-brown alliance) with the far right. Instead of debating peace options, critics’ legitimacy is being questioned.

Media outlets are also aligning themselves. Leading editorials regularly stress that there is no alternative to supplying arms to Ukraine. Other perspectives are dismissed as marginal or out of touch - if they are even mentioned. The old distinction between pacifism and appeasement, diplomacy and naivety, is giving way to polarisation: anyone not on board with the military course is deemed morally suspect or accused of serving Russian propaganda.

Militarisation of Language and Education

The militarisation of language is equally concerning. Terms like “frontline state,” “deterrence,” “combat-readiness,” “will to defend,” and even “capacity to win” are becoming socially acceptable again. In the education sector, more voices are advocating for a return to military instruction in schools. The debate over reinstating conscription reflects this new way of thinking. Schools, universities, and cultural institutions are facing pressure to adopt this new security logic affirmatively.

At the same time, critical voices are receding. Intellectuals who once served as cautionary voices against military escalation now seem reserved or silent. Jürgen Habermas is one of the few exceptions. He has repeatedly spoken out against both mental and material militarisation. The peace movement, once a significant part of Germany’s political culture, has been marginalised. Pacifism is no longer honoured as a moral stance but disparaged as cowardly escapism from reality.

A Look into History

The current mobilisation has historical parallels. Before the First World War, Europe was marked by a similar mix of technocratic war-readiness and patriotic self-hypnosis. Historian Christopher Clark described the European elites as “sleepwalkers” – educated, informed, but blind to alternatives to war. Today, too, the political space for diplomacy, de-escalation, and strategic restraint is being deliberately narrowed. Anyone who still demands such space is quickly suspected of being naïve, disloyal, or even a Putin sympathiser. As in 1914, the war hysteria of our time is being uncritically fuelled by the Social Democratic Party in Germany – the only difference being that in 2025, there is no Karl Liebknecht or Rosa Luxemburg loudly raising their voices.

Historical Parallels: Slogans Then and Now

The author of this article, a member of the generation of war children, is reminded of the perseverance slogans of World War II. “Wheels must roll for victory” was a slogan displayed at train stations across the Reich. We now know they rolled toward catastrophe.

Anyone who looks with me at the final months of World War II will recognise how powerful political language can be as a tool of mobilisation. Back then, the slogans were: “Hold out! The final victory is near!”, “Whoever surrenders loses everything!” or “Better dead than red!” Even in the face of certain defeat, the Nazi regime appealed to total obedience. Today’s situation is incomparable – and yet, a critical look at rhetorical patterns is worthwhile:

- The former “Hold out! The final victory is near!” becomes today’s “There is no alternative to sending weapons” – the notion of a lack of alternatives persists.
- “Whoever surrenders loses everything!” turns into: “A ceasefire would be a victory for Putin.”
- “Better dead than red!” lives on in phrases like: “If we don’t help, Russian tanks will soon be at Berlin’s gates.”

- Since old slurs like “traitor” or “fifth column” are worn out, new labels have emerged: “scoundrel pacifist”, “Putin-understander”, or “useful idiot”.

Again: this is not about equating the two eras, but about recognising rhetorical mechanisms that delegitimise criticism and narrow political diversity.

What Is Possible Now

There are encouraging signs that, in the face of this bellicose frenzy, new formations of the peace movement are emerging in Germany, aligning themselves with the traditional groups. They strive to maintain a critical discourse that goes beyond military logic. Their goal is to ensure that “combat readiness” does not become the new ideal of the German state. A nationwide peace demonstration is planned for the autumn. A publication critically analysing the intellectual mobilisation is currently in print.

The European Commission’s arms buildup project, unprecedented in scale at 800 billion euros, has unexpectedly resonated with the StopRearmEurope initiative. Nearly a hundred large and small European organisations and peace initiatives have joined the call to oppose this policy with a joint campaign, committed instead to advocating for “social, ecological, and shared security.”

Hugo Braun