

'The first weapons for the Bundeswehr' from Le Monde (30 September 1984)

Caption: On 30 September 1984, 30 years after the signing of the London Agreements on 3 October 1954, the French daily newspaper Le Monde looks back on the events that led to the rearmament of West Germany.

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The first weapons for the Bundeswehr

Thirty years ago, when the process of German rearmament began at international level with the London Accords of 3 October 1954, the Wehrmacht, one of the institutions at the service of the Third Reich, was faced with the same drastic measures it had been subjected to in 1945. The victors had made a clean sweep. Many of the members of the Wehrmacht, who had lost everything in the defeat, were left with nothing more than the old, faded uniform, stripped of all insignia (and of course of all decorations) on their backs. Some of the occupying forces took offence at these rags of misfortune and took persecutory — and inapplicable — measures to erase these remnants of a past that they wanted deleted from the German history books for ever.

The civilian population, still in shock over the unprecedented destruction of their country and the world's hatred that accompanied it, could hardly think of anything but their daily pittance. Nor did they want to hear any more about soldiering: the judgement of God had been implacable. Contrary to what had happened in 1918, Germany submitted to it without a murmur, almost surprised at having survived the total collapse, although conditions were miserable.

The country's progressive recovery did not change this attitude. The Allies had pursued their 're-education' project to its limits. The Federal Government had barely been established when, on 22 November 1949, it saw itself enjoined to sign with the High Commissioners for the three Western Powers, what are known as the Petersberg agreements. In addition to easing the status of occupation, those agreements bound Chancellor Adenauer *to maintain the demilitarisation of Federal territory and to use all the means at his disposal to prevent the restoration of combat forces of any kind whatsoever*. Did the Allies think that they had gone too far? It was they, it seems, who suggested to the Chancellor shortly afterwards that he appoint a kind of liaison officer to cover any eventuality.

A secret memorandum

Adenauer did not need coaxing. In May 1950, he discreetly installed in the Chancellery a 'Security Affairs Bureau' and handed it over to a former general, Count Gerhard von Schwerin, who had distinguished himself on the battlefield and, moreover, had belonged to the circle of officers who had plotted against Hitler.

Almost immediately, the Korean War broke out. Did Schwerin think that his hour had come? He began to recruit some of his old comrades. Perhaps he even established contact with industry. At all events, the press learned of his existence. The secret was out. Adenauer had acted as an autocrat, scornful of a public opinion that was always set against anything that resembled the Wehrmacht. The Chancellor did not enter into this quarrel. He simply dismissed Count Schwerin, whose presence at his side cast a shadow over his intentions.

It was a diversion, not a retraction. In the final days of August 1950, Adenauer sent a secret memorandum to the three High Commissioners — which had not even been notified to his Cabinet — proposing a German contribution to Western defence, an offer that was accepted with varying reactions by the NATO Council less than a month later.

Since he had never been a soldier himself, and since basically military issues were not of much interest to him, he convened, once again in secret, a committee of experts who met at Himmerod in the depths of the Eifel region in order to define the optimal conditions of the 'contribution' offered to the Western Powers. A report was submitted to him, but even before reading it, Adenauer knew what the end result would be after his approach to the High Commissioners: through German rearmament, he would recover full and total 'sovereignty' for the Federal Republic, which was still under the increasingly lighter yoke of being an 'occupied country', and enable that Republic become a member of the Atlantic Alliance on an equal footing, thereby ending once and for all 'eternal Germany's' oscillation between West and East. Those objectives were not attainable overnight, and the second could not yet even be voiced, but they did form a coherent plan for the future.

Heinemann's resignation

It was, henceforth, official and public: the Federal Republic was going to rearm. The Interior Minister, Gustav Heinemann, who was also President of the Protestant Synod, resigned in anger and, in a final letter to the Chancellor dated 9 October 1950, denounced this ‘offence against the divine will’ as an expression ‘of an incredible fear and fatalist apathy which has gripped some of our people’. His secession did not, however, result in the entire Protestant Church following his example.

Still acting on a quadripartite basis at the time, the higher authorities, meeting in Spandau in November 1950, declared that the communion of believers did not necessarily imply uniform political views. But although the gesture of Gustav Heinemann, who had nothing of the tribune of the people or faction leader about him, did not receive the backing of the Protestant authorities, it did have a considerable impact on those of his compatriots who rejected in horror West Germany’s return to arms, be it, as was the case with Heinemann, for moral reasons, as a last trace of patriotism (a German military ‘contribution’ could only aggravate the division of Germany), on grounds of pacifism, or simply as an expression of an aversion to the solitary reign of Adenauer.

Pastor Martin Niemoeller, equally prestigious as Heinemann and a much better speaker, with other pastors of this ‘confessing Church’ behind him, who had led the fight against Nazi paganism, addressed audiences who felt that they had been ignored and trampled underfoot by the Chancellor’s policies. A genuine rejectionist movement developed and almost shook the foundations of the fledgling German democracy, although, as it becomes clear with hindsight, at no time did it result in a massive loss of electoral support for the Chancellor’s party, the CDU.

The Social Democratic Party, until after the death of its leader, Kurt Schumacher, on 20 August 1952, strengthened its stance of aggressive antagonism. It rejected both the treaties signed in May 1951 and the treaty on the EDC accompanied by the ‘Pleven Plan’, which would have forbidden the establishment of a conventional German army. Until the late 1950s, it invented all kinds of arguments and ‘alternative solutions’ to thwart Adenauer’s policy of military integration.

But, at the same time, as Joseph Roven’s excellent *History of German Social Democracy* demonstrates so well, it did not intend to wash its hands of its parliamentary responsibilities and even less so to leave the initiative to the streets. If there was no way of preventing German rearmament (interestingly, the SPD would always prefer a professional army with compulsory military service, in spite of the Reichswehr’s unappealing precedent), then rearmament must be exemplary from all points of view. Moreover, without its support, it would have been impossible to incorporate into the Constitution the articles that permitted the organisation of the future Bundeswehr.

A democratic system

When did the Bundeswehr really see the light of day? In November 1980, it celebrated its 25th anniversary, although not without some demonstrations disrupting the ceremonies. In fact, it was on 12 November 1955 that the first Federal Minister of Defence (who had earlier succeeded Count Schwerin), the CDU MP and former trade unionist, Theodor Blank, awarded the certificates of appointment (*Ernennungsurkunden*) to the one hundred and one first volunteer officers of the Bundeswehr, including General Speidel and General Heusinger, who had for several months been serving in plain clothes as advisers to the Chancellor.

Conscription was not adopted until July 1956. The former Wehrmacht officers — whose personal files had been studied for approval by a special Bundestag Committee, a procedure that undoubtedly cleared the new army of the most hardened elements — who were not assigned to the offices of the Ministry, found themselves at first in the 36 huts of Andernach Camp on the Rhine, which had served as a military hospital for the Luftwaffe, as a prisoner-of-war camp for the Americans and, once again, as a military hospital for the French forces.

The early days were difficult, as the retired General Gerd Schmückle’s recently published well-informed memoirs demonstrate. He almost turned around and left when he discovered the chaos there. The problem

was that the Federal Republic was under pressure. It had promised NATO twelve divisions at an early date but was not able to send the twelfth one until 1965.

The first German Ambassador to NATO, Herbert Blankenhorn, lamented the German contingent's delays, in the diary which he kept at that time, and attributed them to a lack of barracks. We may well ask whether the rapidity of the incorporation of the enlisted men as well as the recruits did not somewhat damage the hyper-democratic ideal of 'the citizen in uniform' that was originally professed by a few officers who were attracted by the idea of an army which had broken away from all its former conventions. This would undoubtedly be the opinion of General Schmückle who seems to think that the morale of the present Bundeswehr is not exactly what it should be ... However that may be, the laws and directives that govern it are based on a liberalism that would be difficult to find anywhere else.

Years with low birth-rates

It goes without saying that conscientious objection is accepted and that young people invoke it often (even though the current coalition in power has extended to twenty-one months the duration of civilian service that replaces army service, which lasted for only 15 months). It also goes without saying that army units choose their 'shop stewards', that soldiers and officers may vote and stand in elections, that they have the right to form trade unions (there are even two competing unions in their ranks, one of which is affiliated with the DGB — Deutscher Gewerkschaftsband, or German Trade Union Federation — the central labour organisation), and that in the event of an injustice or a reprimand, they may address their complaints to an Ombudsman appointed by the Bundestag (German Lower House) and accountable to it.

The Bundestag's Defence Committee may, on its own initiative and without a majority vote in Parliament, set itself up as a committee of inquiry, with all that that entails in terms of investigative powers and powers to issue subpoenas. The 'head' of the Bundeswehr is the Minister of Defence during times of peace and the Chancellor during times of war. In both instances, German divisions are fully under the command of NATO.

All this flexibility — or these precautions, if you prefer — have not prevented crises, even scandals, in the Bundeswehr, of which the most notorious being the *Spiegel* affair in 1962, which cost Franz-Joseph Strauss the defence portfolio and, perhaps, even more. The most recent scandal is the one surrounding the abrupt dismissal of the four-star general, Günter Kiessling, on the more than questionable suspicion of 'mixing with the wrong kind of people'. During each scandal, the press and Parliament completely fulfilled their role. And, inasmuch as military personnel were implicated, the Bundeswehr did not escape their scrutiny.

The Bundeswehr is not by any means at the end of its troubles. The arrival of the years with low birth-rates, which will make itself felt from 1987 on, and the rise in the cost of weapons systems — of which we saw the effect on the Tornado aircraft — will put the Bundeswehr to the test.

During this time, the pacifist movement tends to isolate it from the rest of the country when it does not stand four-square in the way of its operations, as it did recently. And the reserve officer, formerly a major figure in German society, is now no more than a 'civvy' like the others or, at best, since the Bundeswehr gives everyone technical training, a job-seeker. Times have certainly changed, and the Bundeswehr, which is perhaps suffering from a lack of tradition, must be content, for now, with being surrounded, as someone said, by a 'benevolent indifference'.

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