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Is Every Soldier a Veteran? A Critical Analysis of the 2018 German Veteran Definition

by *Christian Weber*

On 2018 German Remembrance Day, eleven million Germans became veterans, most of them probably without even noticing. Only the readers of the *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper learned of the new definition in the headline, condensed to the simple formula: “Signed and sealed! From now on every member of the Bundeswehr – past or present – is a veteran.” The actual effect of such a standardised definition remains to be seen though. After all, Thomas de Maizière, former Federal Minister of Defence, had already failed in his attempt to define the concept and establish a policy on veterans.

In its issue of 18 November 2018 *Bild am Sonntag* quotes the present Federal Minister of Defence, Ursula von der Leyen, as saying that “All veterans, whether they have served on operations abroad, in the Cold War or on peacetime routine duty, are united in having championed peace and freedom wearing the Bundeswehr uniform.” Since the number of all active and former Bundeswehr military personnel – including generations of conscripts – may easily reach some 11 million, this is a tremendous claim. Most people in German-speaking countries are likely to be uncomfortable with the term veteran anyway. After all, the Latin word *veteranus* refers to a long-serving and well-seasoned soldier. To refer to a 17-year-old recruit as a veteran from the day he enters a barracks for the first time, defies an intuitive definition of the term, if nothing else. In addition, it is completely unclear if the concept is to entail further benefits or political measures.

It was not until a week later that the Federal Minister of Defence issued an order of the day in which she clarified that “from now on, every soldier on active duty in the Bundeswehr and all those honourably discharged, that is without loss of rank, are considered Bundeswehr veterans.” Based on this definition the Minister called for proposals to be drawn up on how to ensure a new appreciation of the veterans’ commitment. These efforts are, above all, meant to build on numerous initiatives to improve the support provided to soldiers with injuries and operational stress disorders. Moreover, the “recognition and appreciation of veterans” is referred to as an important concern, which is why Germany should apply to host the *Invictus Games*, i.e. a sports event for disabled service members.

Retrospect: The German Veterans’ Policy Debate

The debate on the veteran concept has a long history. As long back as in 2011, the then Federal Minister of Defence, Thomas de Maizière, disclosed to German parliamentarians that he planned to introduce a policy in the Bundeswehr for dealing with and caring for veterans. He even stated that this project was going to be one of his political priorities. Yet, apart from a short debate on the possible introduction of a veterans’ day, this announcement never led to anything. Only more than a year after first announcing a veterans’ policy did the Minister finally decide on a definition.

In a rather low-profile approach, de Maizière announced during a ceremony in Bad Reichenhall that from now on “anyone who was honourably discharged from active service in the Bundeswehr and participated in at least one humanitarian or peace-keeping or peace-building mission is considered a veteran.” This definition, too, was meant to be officially recognized. But obviously it never caught on.

Instead, the Minister drew harsh criticism from the opposition parties. Rainer Arnold, former defence spokesman of the Social Democrats' parliamentary group in the *Bundestag*, even called de Maizière's venture “conservative symbolic policy” and “a dusty remnant from the time before 1945.” Politicians from the socialist *Die Linke* party warned of a further “militarisation of society.” Skepticism prevailed among Green Party members, too. Nevertheless, the former parliamentary group of the Greens had an expert discussion on the question whether the concept should be extended to members of civilian emergency services. Only the former liberal coalition partner *FDP* supported de Maizière's veterans' policy initiative from the very beginning and published its own suggestions which, however, could not be pursued further when the *FDP* had to withdraw from Parliament after the 2013 elections.

The Dilemma of a German Definition of Veteran

The political debate reveals that the term *veteran* remains overshadowed by its history in Germany. To this day, the experience from two World Wars and the strong presence of the historical veterans' associations in the fights between hostile camps in the Weimar Republic determine the way we look at veterans. Unfortunately, people overlook the fact that, in the interwar period, certain veterans' associations such as the still existing *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold* played an important political and social role and were committed to the preservation of the democratic order. Regrettably, this aspect was completely ignored in the 2017 debate on traditions in the Bundeswehr.

Even more decisive for the failure of de Maizière's venture might have been the circumstance that the leading soldier associations and interest groups were unable to agree on a common veteran definition. The German Bundeswehr Association even warned that a definition might divide the troops. It held that a mission-related definition would exclude all those soldiers who served during the Cold War before Germany committed its forces to operations abroad. The Reservist Association argued in much the same way and, presumably with its own members in mind, requested that all former soldiers be recognised as veterans. Those younger veterans' associations which were only founded in the early 2010s, such as the *Bund Deutscher Einsatzveteranen* (Association of German Mission Veterans) or the *Combat Veterans*, and whose members are predominantly soldiers with operational experience or even with mission-related disabilities, requested that at least one operational deployment abroad should be the criterion to qualify for veteran status. With their commitment, these newly established veterans' associations had gained a lot of attention for the interests of disabled soldiers.

In fact, there was growing political pressure from 2011, when, mainly due to the escalation of the Afghanistan campaign and the increasing rate of combat action, with soldiers wounded or even killed, more and more Bundeswehr personnel returned from operations abroad with experiences that were in sharp contrast to the prosperous peacetime society at home. On the one hand, there was a lack of adequate care for physically or mentally disabled deployment returnees; for a long time the Bundeswehr found it difficult to deal with traumatised soldiers in particular. On the other hand, many soldiers complained that the dangers and burdens of their service on operations abroad were either unknown to most of their fellow citizens at home, or even met with open rejection.

This is where a gap opened up in the relationship between the Bundeswehr and society, but also within the Bundeswehr between the Cold War veterans and the generation of “mission veterans”; a gap that became even deeper when compulsory military service was suspended in 2011, and that de Maizière obviously tried to eliminate with his venture. Another aim was to prevent soldiers who had served on operations abroad from abandoning the role model of the “citizen in uniform” in the wake of that experience, and from developing a kind of warrior mentality.

Shortly before de Maizière had been on a visit to the USA and seen for himself how much effort is put into honouring veterans there. While it was not difficult to reach a political consensus in Germany on granting material support to soldiers with deployment-related disorders, and although their situation had been considerably improved by legislature in recent years, many soldiers still feel to this day that society owes them the appreciation they deserve. At the end of his term in office, there was not much left of the focus that de Maizière had announced. On the contrary, he upset many soldiers with a statement made in public that they should please stop craving for attention. Since then, the FMOD had become rather quiet about the veteran issue. Even a further internal round table with the previously named associations yielded no result.

What is the Point of a Veteran Concept?

All the more surprising is the 360-degree definition presented in *Bild am Sonntag*, which – at a closer look – reveals to be a non-definition because it avoids any specification. It is therefore perfectly opaque what added value a definition should have that is neither clearly different from that of a soldier nor that of a reservist.¹ Not surprisingly, commentators took the floor soon after, calling for a kind of veterans’ status for those who, before the suspension of compulsory military service, performed community service instead of joining the military, thus also rendering an undoubtedly important service to society.²

Understandably, the *Bund Deutscher Einsatzveteranen* (Association of German Mission Veterans) which had no say in the definition but was actually excluded, reacted accordingly with its criticism. The opposition, too, complained that they had not been involved. Large parts of the population, though, may well have received the announcement with a shrug. Nor did the millions of new veterans arouse much media interest. Besides the German Reservists Association, the Bundeswehr Association, in particular, heaped great praise on the new concept because, in keeping with the association’s demands, it “does not exclude anyone”. Whether the criterion of not excluding anyone should be in the focus of the veterans’ debate is a question, however, that will require critical examination. Actually, in spite of all uniformity, every major organisational element, every service and every arm cultivates its own rituals, tradition and symbols. Eventually the medals and decorations worn by many soldiers also serve as commendation for specific performances.

Providing a new definition of “veteran” should rather aim at paying tribute to a new group of soldiers that came into being after Germany started committing troops to operations abroad, soldiers who, for many years, were somewhat clumsily referred to as “deployment returnees.” As far as this group is concerned, it is by no means only about social recognition which, without any doubt, should be granted to all emergency personnel and occupational groups that are particularly committed to public welfare. The idea that turning one’s attention to one group means to take it away from another is not plausible anyway because social recognition is not a limited commodity. The focus is on the particular needs of those soldiers who, having served on operations abroad,³ are more affected by physical and mental health problems than those who

¹ In Germany, a reservist is a person who performed military service in the Bundeswehr and was not dishonourably discharged (loss of rank) from the armed forces.

² See for example Krex (2018): [Blumann statt Flecktarn](#) (Boilersuit Instead of camouflage suit), in: *Zeit Online* [online], rev. 10 December 2018.

³ Given the increasingly complex tasks of the Bundeswehr and the growing burden imposed by major exercises abroad, an adequate definition should also be agreed upon for the term *Einsatz* (deployment; mission). The German military commitment as part of NATO’s *Enhanced Forward Presence* in the Baltic region, for example, is considered a “standby commitment” and the soldiers involved are awarded a service medal.

have served on peacetime routine duty at their home base. To this day, however, it is completely unclear how many and, in particular, which soldiers have served on operations abroad. It would be an important step indeed to establish empirical records on how soldiers with operational experience feel after the end of their service engagement. Many programs to improve the situation of soldiers with deployment-related disorders have in common that they aim at reintegrating and taking care of them in the armed forces. This approach, however, ignores the fact that many of those soldiers consciously dissociate themselves from their former employer after their discharge from the forces. This is all the more true for the families who, more often than not, think that it is actually the Bundeswehr that is responsible for a lot of suffering. In fact, reports from civilian telephone helplines are piling up of former Bundeswehr soldiers or their families seeking help. The problem is that these organisations find it difficult to deal with the particular needs of soldiers.

Can the Netherlands Serve as an Example?

A better approach is pursued in the Netherlands, which also had a hard time adopting an appropriate stance on veterans. They had definition problems, too, when at first only former soldiers who had served on operations abroad were to qualify as veterans. It was only later that the Dutch realised that being deployed on operations abroad creates special needs, for active soldiers as much as for former service members. As a result, the Dutch parliament unanimously (!) agreed on a Veterans' Act in 2012. Since then, all soldiers who have served on operations abroad are considered veterans; their interests are safeguarded by a special Veterans' Institute as focal point of all governmental and social veterans' initiatives.⁴

The institute also carries out scientific studies and operational documentation. In addition, veterans are contacted on a regular basis by governmental authorities to gather information about their condition. The Dutch veterans' policy is rounded off by activities to increase social recognition such as a Veterans' Day under the patronage of the Dutch Royal Family, a "Veterans' Card" offering access to specific benefits as well as projects such as the "Veteran in the Classroom", which helps to familiarise pupils with the experiences of soldiers in a much more relaxed way than in Germany. Of course, there is also a Veterans' Memorial. These efforts have contributed to significantly improving the veterans' image in the Dutch society in recent years. Thus, according to an opinion poll conducted by the Veterans' Institute in 2013, well over 90 percent of the Dutch associated veterans with terms such as *helpful, faithful or courageous*.⁵

The Term Veteran Should Have a Positive Connotation

This policy on veterans could serve as a role model for Germany. With national armed forces being involved in increasingly close multinational cooperation, a common definition agreed by the Allies would be desirable. So far, such aspects have unfortunately been excluded from the debate on a European Army. The new German definition, however, is unique in international comparison.⁶ It would therefore be advisable to follow the Dutch example and link the term "veteran" to servicemen and -women with operational experience. This is also implied in the order of the day given by the Ministry of Defence on the veteran concept, stressing efforts in support of soldiers with deployment-related disorders, and addressing the *Invictus Games*, i.e. a clearly mission-related event, as an example for possible veterans' projects.

⁴ For summary information refer to the Veteran Institute's website at <https://www.veteraneninstituut.nl/english/>.

⁵ See Veteraneninstituut (2018): [Public Opinion on Veterans. Fact Sheet](#) [online], rev. 10 December 2018.

⁶ Even the mission-independent and thus relatively wide US veteran definition, for example, only refers to former and honourably discharged soldiers.

What is more, linking the veteran concept to Remembrance Day was a particularly unfortunate move. It shifts the focus on soldiers killed in action or suffering from physical or mental post-deployment disorders, which puts this aspect in the centre of public perception of Bundeswehr operations abroad. It is little surprise that in the media, for instance in the German TV crime series *Tatort*, veterans are mainly portrayed as mentally disturbed offenders. This creates a distorted picture in public perception, given the huge number of soldiers who return from operations abroad without any disorders but with positive experiences, who feel, for example, that they have gained in personal maturity. This makes it even more difficult to arrive at a sober consideration.

A more adequate approach seems to be the International Day of UN Peacekeepers which, following a decision by the United Nations General Assembly in February 2003, is held on 29 May each year. This day is meant to pay tribute to the military and civilian personnel serving the cause of peace around the world on behalf of the United Nations. At the same time, the day provides an opportunity to remind German politicians of their responsibility for those who commit themselves to the peace and security of the Federal Republic of Germany in international operations abroad, many of them at a high personal risk. A memorial in the vicinity of the Reichstag could attract the attention that the existing monuments are denied due to their location – such as the Bundeswehr Memorial, located rather off the beaten track in a side street close to the Ministry of Defence, or the “Grove of Remembrance” which, though attractively designed, is inaccessible to the public within the perimeter of the Bundeswehr Operations Command in Potsdam. This would also reflect the Comprehensive Approach as guiding principle of German foreign and security policy.

The new veteran concept is eager to do justice to everyone. The added value of such a maximally inclusive approach seems questionable, though. We should turn to those soldiers with operational experience who require particular attention. Designating this group as veterans is not an act of exclusion but of care; it epitomises the guiding principle of the citizen in uniform because this is the central idea shared by *all* active and former soldiers and which should provide them with a much stronger bond than the term “veteran”.

*Dr Christian Weber is an Army Reserve captain and was deployed to Mali. In 2016, his dissertation *Veteranenpolitik in Deutschland (German Policy on Veterans)* was published by Nomos Verlag.*