

DONALD ABENHEIM

Reforging the Iron Cross

*The Search for Tradition in the West
German Armed Forces*



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Armed Forces

DONALD ABENHEIM

WITH A FOREWORD BY
Gordon A. Craig

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TO MY TEACHERS—

Gordon A. Craig and Peter Paret

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Abbreviations

AA	Auswärtiges Amt
a.D.	ausser Dienst
ADK	Arbeitsgemeinschaft demokratischer Kreise e.V.
AusbKp	Ausbildungskompanie
Az	Aktenzeichen
BA	Bundesarchiv, Koblenz
BA/MA	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg
Befh	Befehlshaber
BMVg	Bundesministerium der Verteidigung
BW	Bundeswehr
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union
ChdSt	Chef des Stabes
CSU	Christlich Soziale Union
DAG	Deutsche Angestellten-Gewerkschaft
DBWV	Deutscher Bundeswehr-Verband e.V.
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik
DGB	Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund
DKP	Deutsche Kommunistische Partei
DOKZENTBw	Dokumentations Zentrum der Bundeswehr, Bonn
d. Res.	der Reserve
EKD	Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands
e.V.	eingetragener Verein
EVG	Europäische Verteidigungsgemeinschaft
FAZ	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei
Frhr	Freiherr
Fü B	Führungsstab Bundeswehr
Fü H	Führungsstab Heer
Fü L	Führungsstab Luftwaffe
Fü M	Führungsstab Marine
Fü TV	Führungsstab Territoriale Verteidigung

ABBREVIATIONS

Fü S	Führungsstab Streitkräfte
G ₁	Führungsgebiet 1 (Personal)
Gen	General
GenInsp	Generalinspekteur der Bundeswehr
GG	Grundgesetz
HDv	Heeresdienstvorschrift
HIAG	Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehörigen der ehemaligen Waffen SS
HOS	Heeresoffizierschule
IfdT	Information für die Truppe
i.G.	im Generalstabsdienst
InFüSBw	Schule für Innere Führung der Bundeswehr
IP Stab	Informations-und Pressestab
IR	Infanterieregiment
Insp	Inspekteur
K.Adm	Konteradmiral
KavDiv	Kavalleriedivision
Kdr	Kommandeur
KTV	Kommando Territoriale Verteidigung
M	Marine
MdB	Mitglied des Bundestages
MGFA	Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt
MGM	Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen
Min	Minister
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NfD	Nur für den Dienstgebrauch
NS	Nationalsozialismus
NVA	Nationale Volksarmee
O	Oberst
ObdH	Oberbefehlshaber des Heeres
ÖTV	Gewerkschaft "Öffentliche Dienste, Transport und Verkehr"
OKH	Oberkommando des Heeres
PGA	Personalgutachterausschuss
Pz	Panzer
PzBtl	Panzerbataillon
PzDiv	Panzerdivision

ABBREVIATIONS

Pz. Tr.	Panzertruppe
SDS	Sozialistischer deutscher Studentenbund
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
SG	Soldatengesetz
SS	Schutzstaffel
STAL	Stabsabteilungsleiter
StS	Staatssekretär
SZ	Süddeutsche Zeitung
TF	Truppenführung
Tgb	Tagebuchnummer
UAL	Unterabteilungsleiter
VdS	Verband deutscher Soldaten
VS	Verschlusssache
WBK	Wehrbereichskommando
WBO	Wehrbeschwerdeordnung
VBK	Verteidigungsbezirkskommando
VKK	Verteidigungskreiskommando
ZDv	Zentrale Dienstvorschrift
ZIF/ZUA	Zentrum Innere Führung-Zentrales Unterstützungsarchiv, Koblenz
z.S.	zur See

Foreword

IN THE LAST months of 1954, I visited Germany for the first time since before the war. It was a kind of vacation, for I had just finished writing a large book on the rise and fall of the Prussian-German army from the seventeenth century to 1945, and I had certainly not expected that my trip would coincide with the rebirth of an institution I thought had been disposed of. But that is what happened, for I arrived immediately after the conclusion of the Paris agreements, which authorized the raising of a West German force of five hundred thousand officers and men for NATO, and the extent of that authorization and the plans being made to implement it filled the air and the columns of the press during my visit.

If one could believe what one read, few West Europeans were happy about the prospects of German rearmament. Newspaper stories dated from Holland and Denmark made this clear enough, as did a cartoon from *Le Rire*, which was widely reprinted in the local press, showing a disconsolate Marianne, obviously pregnant with "l'armée allemande," a condition that she blamed on a departing hussar with a strong resemblance to John Foster Dulles. But unhappiest of all were the West Germans themselves, not only the young men who would be called on to serve in the new force (hundreds of whom showed their displeasure during the first week of November by demonstrating before the railway station in Cologne, where officials from the *Amt Blank*, the provisional defense ministry, had arranged a public discussion of their plans), but citizens of all ages and professions. "One may dare the generalization," Paul Sethe wrote in an article called "The Will of the Twenty-Year Olds" in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 10 November 1954, "that at this time emotional opposition to military service is in no European country as strong as it is in the Federal Republic."

Under the subtitle "Zerissene Tradition," Sethe went on to explain why this was so:

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The military tradition of the Germans was broken off in 1945. In the nine years since, memories and sentiments have become overwhelming among young people that make it difficult to link up with this heritage. Two lost wars with their terrible casualties; great parts of our cities will remain in rubble for long to come; the appeal to idealism and a sense of sacrifice have been brutally abused and arouse today only bitterness among many; the long struggle of the occupiers against German soldierly pride has not been without effect; the division of Germany paralyzes many.

In the disorderly discussion in Cologne, many different explanations were given for the prevalent antimilitarism, but basic to them all was the fear that, since the army had been the source of so much ill in the past, this would inevitably be so in the future also and that one could expect this new army to free itself as quickly as possible from constitutional and parliamentary restraints, to undermine the republic's democratic institutions, and to use its influence to inaugurate an adventurist, and inevitably disastrous, foreign policy.

Almost thirty-five years have passed since that turbulent autumn and winter of 1954. In that time the army that was projected has become a reality and a reliable and respected component of the western military alliance. The baleful consequences predicted in 1954 have not been realized, largely because parliament and the defense ministry, working in close collaboration, established at the outset rules for the selection of officers and for the civic education of all ranks that were based on the experiences of the past and designed to avoid its mistakes. Although their work in the years that followed was accompanied by continued public suspicion and a not inconsiderable amount of professional resistance, they succeeded in making their ideal of an army of citizens in uniform a reality, without in any way impairing its military skills.

The trials and tribulations that they encountered along the way, Donald Abenheim has described with admirable detail and insight in the pages that follow. It is clear from his account that the problem that has caused them most trouble and been least amenable to solution has been that of tradition, the articulation in a form acceptable to the Bundeswehr and to the civilian society that supports it of a connection with past German armies and their experience, insights, values, and achievements. Without a sense of tradition, a military force lacks perspective and orientation; its professional stature is di-

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minished; and it is in danger of being degraded into a mere technical facility whose purpose is killing. Yet after 1945, with the shadow of Adolf Hitler hanging over their past, it was difficult for German soldiers to talk comfortably about tradition, let alone to devise a code of tradition that would meet general approval. If such a document passed over the National Socialist period in silence, it would seem to do a disservice to those soldiers of the Wehrmacht who had fought bravely and well for their country. On the other hand, to do justice to them by including their accomplishments in the tradition of the new Bundeswehr ran the risk of seeming to condone actions that could not, by the most casuistical verbal facility, be squared with soldierly honor—collusion with the Nazis of the basest kind, complicity in unspeakable atrocities.

The most fascinating pages in Donald Abenheim's book deal with the new German army's attempt to deal with this dilemma, in the course of which it has been submitted to a process of historical self-examination more rigorous than anything of the sort undergone by other major social groups in Germany. The problem of tradition has not been solved. Indeed, Professor Abenheim points out that it is inevitable that, in an evolving society, it will be posed anew with every generation. But the self-examination in itself has been healthy and, together with the principles of civic education laid down at the time of the Bundeswehr's establishment, has helped to integrate what, historically, was always a state within a state into Germany's new democratic society.

Gordon A. Craig

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REFORGING THE IRON CROSS

Introduction

IN NOVEMBER 1985 the West German armed forces celebrated their thirtieth anniversary. The occasion went largely unnoticed in a world that three decades earlier had watched with concern the rebirth of a German army and feared the danger it might pose to the young democracy of the Federal Republic. In a speech in the Ministry of Defense in Bonn honoring the anniversary, the President of the Federal Republic, Richard von Weizsäcker, praised the achievements of the West German military and its contribution to the Atlantic alliance. Weizsäcker did not hesitate to lend his considerable moral authority to an institution that for much of its thirty years has been the object of intense debate and mistrust—an army created from the wreckage of Nazi Germany, which since its inception had struggled with the political ambiguities of its background as much as with the strategic and operational difficulties of its mission.

Looking to the past, Weizsäcker spoke of the West German army as having been founded on the traditions of the Prussian reformers of the early nineteenth century and of the military resistance to Hitler. His reference to the era of Prussian reform was reminiscent of an action by West Germany's first Minister of Defense, Theodor Blank, thirty years earlier. Blank chose 12 November 1955, the 200th birthday of Scharnhorst, the military leader of the Prussian reform movement, as the date for the induction of the first 101 volunteers of the new army. In a brief speech, Blank told the little group that it would have to build the new army without either glorifying Germany's military past or damning it totally. The new army would adopt nothing from the past without making certain that it was still valid for the present. In 1955 this injunction proved difficult to carry out because of memories of Nazism and the war and the feeling among many Germans that their history had ended ten years before. The seeming ease with which Weizsäcker now honored the Prussian reformers and the resistance to Hitler later belied the difficulty the selection of historical examples

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had once caused the Bundeswehr. In the early 1950s, the need to select what might be called a usable past gave rise to a long debate about the army's role in German history and also about the position of the soldier in state and society. This controversy, and its accompanying effort to create a new type of German soldier, was a continuation of a much broader debate, which had been going on for a century and a half, about the nature of Germany's military institutions and their relationship to state power and society.

The Iron Cross, the emblem of the West German military, reveals within its own history the problem faced by those who have reformed the links between the German soldier and the past. Although for some people, the Iron Cross is synonymous with the swastika, its historical reality includes far more than merely the Third Reich. King Frederick William III of Prussia awarded the first Iron Cross in 1813, during the "iron time" of the wars of liberation against Napoleon. He gave the decoration for bravery in battle, without regard for the recipient's rank in society. The medal signified the democratization of the army and its unity with the nation and state in the struggle against the French occupier. When Prussia again led Germany to war against France in 1870, the Iron Cross symbolized the victory of arms in German unification and the outstanding role of the military in society and politics. The medal given out by the millions after 1914, however, became the badge of the front-line fighter and of Germany's refusal to accept the humiliation of defeat in 1918. Adolf Hitler, one of the millions who had received the Iron Cross in the trenches, reestablished the award in September 1939. This Iron Cross bore the swastika on its obverse side, signifying the bond between National Socialism and the wars of liberation, the unification of the empire and the First World War. As a result, German soldiers guilty of war crimes defaced this symbol even as they wore it themselves. Despite the events of the period between 1933 and 1945, the founders of the new West German army adopted the Iron Cross as an insignia after 1955, seeking to return it to its original, more democratic meaning.

This study examines the way professional soldiers, academics, and politicians in the 1950s created the self-image of the new West German soldier, an image that had to be acceptable to the new democratic Germany. When asked in 1953 what relevance the history of former German armies had to the new Bundeswehr, one of the leaders in the

rearmament process declared that important threads of tradition had passed through the vacuum of Nazi Germany, and these threads should be taken up and spun into a new fabric. But what exactly were these durable threads? Opinions varied then as they do today. "The problem of tradition," as one of the major framers of reform policy, Wolf Count Baudissin, has observed, "is the traditional problem of the West German armed forces." In confronting this issue over the past thirty years, the participants in the official and public debate have reflected on the relationship between civil and military power in German history, the nature of command and leadership, the political importance of military symbolism, and—perhaps above all—the complicity of the German military in the rise of National Socialism and in carrying out its policies.

The following pages describe the context and development, formulating and applying, new historically rooted political and ethical standards to the German soldier, the solutions adopted by the leadership of the armed forces, and the fate of their policies during the last three decades. Needless to say, Germany's military past and the traditions that were a part of it constituted only one problem for the founders of the Bundeswehr. They had to deal with a daunting combination of political, operational, historical, and legal obstacles to rearmament, all of which would have to be examined in any full account of the creation of the West German armed forces, a work that remains to be written. Inherent in these issues of politics and strategy, however, was the relationship of the West German soldier to his past. In the sphere of international politics, the founding of the new army was linked to the future of West Germany within a united Western Europe. The new army was also clearly on the front line of a world divided between ideological antagonists. These facts complicated the task of motivating West German soldiers to fight in what would surely be, from the perspective of the Federal Republic, a nuclear civil war. In the arena of domestic politics, the place of the new soldier in state and society was worrisome for the fledgling democracy of West Germany. Would the soldier of tomorrow attempt to regain his former political and social position at the expense of the new democratic system? How could the soldier's rights be assured while training him realistically for combat that would be infinitely more brutal than that of World War II?

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The arming of the Federal Republic in the 1950s occurred as the spread of nuclear weapons and the establishment of the alliance system were transforming the face of war. The West Germans were late-comers to these developments, and they had to adjust their operational ideas as well as their concepts of military tradition to them. The attempt to create a tradition for the future German soldier also influenced historical scholarship. The role of the military in the collapse of the Weimar Republic was an important issue in the scholarly debate over the failure of the republic. This debate took place during the years when the controversy about the West German soldier and his valid heritage was beginning, and it is not surprising that historians came to participate directly in formulating policy in the Ministry of Defense.

The founders of the West German armed forces promised that the future army would represent something fundamentally new in contrast to the era before 1945, and that it would avoid the political and social abuses of the past. This promise was to be fulfilled through a process of military reform of the political, social, legal, and historical role of the professional soldier in German life. During the initial period of growth of the Bundeswehr, through the mid-1960s, the question of the validity of the German soldier's heritage grew more pressing as the innovations in and reforms of the professional soldier's purpose and self-image encountered a variety of political and operational difficulties in the years after 1955. The separate debates about reform and tradition merged as time passed. Those who spoke of reform were forced to define what were valid and what were invalid traditions; often an argument that began over the cut of the West German army uniform ended in an exchange about the role of the military in German history and the nature of war in the modern world. This study reconstructs certain of the key episodes in this debate and highlights the main phases in which this exchange has taken place. *The record of the controversy over the self-image of the West German soldier reflects the consolidation of the Bundeswehr within the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany.*

The problem tradition poses for the modernization and reform of armies is of course not unique to Germany. In the recent past, the French, the Russians, and the Chinese, to mention three prominent cases, have reformed and reconstituted their armies and have carefully

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selected elements of their military history for contemporary inspiration. Although the present work addresses solely the West Germans after 1945, it illustrates the general importance of coming to grips with a state's military heritage, and it highlights the difficulties faced by those who rebuild an army. The German professional soldier's image of himself, expressed in symbols and customs drawn from the past, probably has less to say about his effectiveness in combat (although that is surely important) than about his relationship to other social and political groups. This relationship was especially difficult to define in the West Germany of the 1950s, while memories of the 1920s and 1930s loomed over the enterprise of building a democracy.

The anxieties of civilians as they regard the profession of arms in today's world are a part of the story, as is the use of history in a modern bureaucratic organization. The West German experience illustrates the difficulty of enlisting history in the service of political aims, while attempting to preserve a measure of historical honesty in a pluralistic society. Although Germany's defeat in 1945 and the U.S. debacle in Vietnam in the 1970s are hardly comparable, the gradual emergence of public myths, traditions, and symbols explaining the Vietnam War offers an interesting counterpoint to the German case in the 1950s. For anyone who lived through the political turbulence of the 1960s, the apparent shift among Americans from condemnation to respect for the veterans of the Indochina war among Americans, and the renaissance of popular esteem for traditions of self-sacrifice and bravery in battle are quite remarkable.

Such a shift in attitudes always raises problems when the attempt is made to reconcile a nascent tradition with the historical record, as revealed by sound scholarship—as the Germans discovered repeatedly in their own debates. The soldier and his traditions in the Federal Republic of the 1950s are unique, defying easy comparison with other events in recent history. The historical memory that dominated the founding of the Federal Republic and the evolution of its political culture was shaped by the outcome of the two world wars and Germany's decline from political and cultural ascendancy into genocide and barbarism. The image of tradition in the armed forces and the society that had evolved from the late nineteenth century to 1945 was strongly linked to the perception of the past.

PART ONE

The New Army and the Past



1. The Maintenance of Tradition and the Burden of the Past

FOR GENERATIONS of Germans, the Garrison Church in Potsdam has symbolized the Prussian tradition, which the bells of its carillon recalled every hour with a verse set to a Mozart theme: "Be loyal and honest unto the cold grave."¹ Until 1945, the bells rang out over the town, joining the drums and fifes and the cadence of marching boots of the Potsdam regiments. In the crypt beneath the tower were the tombs of King Frederick William I, the creator of the Brandenburg-Prussian Army and the builder of Potsdam, and Frederick the Great, whose diplomatic and military genius made Prussia a great power, men whose elevated sense of the importance of the state became an important tradition of German life. For many, Potsdam symbolized an "authentic and strict soldierly spirit," which represented "simplicity, modesty, conscientiousness, and order, as well as the willingness to assume responsibility and sacrifice oneself for a greater idea and cause."² The exhilaration of Prussia's Icarus flight to power led succeeding generations to exaggerate these virtues and the military traditions they came to symbolize. As Friedrich Meinecke reflected in his *German Catastrophe*, popular adoration of the "young god lieutenant" and naive self-admiration of Prussian virtues revealed the degree to which these traditions had shrunk by the early twentieth century to a rigid convention all too often expressed in the forced Potsdam dialect of the officer's mess.³

¹ Werner Schwips, *Die Garnisonkirchen von Berlin und Potsdam* (Berlin, 1964), pp. 54ff.

² Kurt Hesse, cited in Wolfgang Paul, *Das Potsdamer Infanterie-Regiment 9, 1918–1945: Preussische Tradition in Krieg und Frieden*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Osnabrück, 1985), 1: v.

³ Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Deutsche Katastrophe*, in *Friedrich Meinecke Werke: Autobiographische Schriften*, 9 vols. (Stuttgart, 1969), 8: 336. For a full discussion of the problem of military tradition before 1945, see the excellent book by Gustav-Adolf Caspar et al., *Tradition in deutschen Streitkräften bis 1945*, vol. 1 in *Entwicklung*