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TRADITIONS IN
MILITARY-STRATEGIC
THOUGHT IN GERMANY AND
THE PROBLEM OF
DETERRENCE

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For years the debate in central Europe on national security policy has been going around in circles. In accordance with the military doctrine of flexible response, each one of the armies in the Western alliance is geared towards nuclear deterrence. And yet, the strategy that prevails is not a uniform, cogent, realizable, consensual "deterrence strategy". It combines different national security policy options and is supposed to document in this manner a uniformity of view that does not exist. It cannot not even be clearly discerned whether this strategy involves "deterrence through retaliation" or "deterrence through restraint"¹⁾ of the enemy.

Alone the several thousand nuclear warheads of the so-called battlefield weapons, which have been deployed for decades in Europe, possess the capacity to destroy the civilization of the entire world. The rationality of this insured self-destruction should hostilities break out is supported by arguments of such a fictitious sort that the implied dilemma is revealed. One example is the that (political) stability will be guaranteed by escalating the balance of terror. A serious analysis lays bare each of the relevant contradictions of defense and military policy.²⁾

In the Federal Republic of Germany, these problems of the NATO defense policy have been brought to the general public's attention by the peace movement. The general perception is as follows: A defense strategy that obviously cannot be used without injuring oneself more than the enemy, in which one's own country is destroyed more and therefore deters oneself more than the enemy, cannot be a reliable strategy of deterrence. All roads leading to such a self-destructive, defensive war must be blocked.

Contrary to the views of the critics of deterrence, the national security leadership elite in the Federal Republic of Germany cling rigidly to this nuclear concept of NATO. The discrepancies between the supporters and opponents are obvious; they are more than a legitimization crisis caused by the times.³⁾ For the observer of these opposing schools of thought, the problem arises as to why military experts continue to adhere to the principles of nuclear forward defense. It seems as if insight into "the illusionary nature of security through power, through the obscene absurdities of total war"⁴⁾ has not made its way into the military thought paradigms. This thus prevents the military from thoroughly examining the premises of its concepts of defense on warfare, and from undertaking a revision of national security policy - all of which is called for in light of the impending danger of genocide, a danger which motivated Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell in 1947 to call for a new way of thinking of humanity. The traditions of military thought that were developed at the beginning of the modern age have retained their importance up to the present day and have had their place in the history of warfare until Hiroshima. In order to come a step closer to understanding the problem of the steadfastness of the military with regard to the above, the question will be posed as to whether these said traditions are still justifiable in view of the new conditions of the strategy for survival that have evolved in the nuclear age.

1. On the Development of the Military Doctrine of Annihilation

Everyone refers to him. His name must always be mentioned and his work provides the necessary quotes. For more than a century and a half, the classic writer on modern military strategy, Carl von Clausewitz, and his work "On War"⁵⁾ have been

the central issue and point of argumentation of military thought in the East and the West. Perhaps without meaning to, he prepared the dogma of war to the extreme. In the third and fourth book of this work, he actually presents a realistic and hard analysis of the efficiency of major battles and the importance of skilful military command for offensive success. It is precisely such statements that occasioned Liddell Hart to see in Clausewitz the "Mahdi of the masses and of the mutual massacres"⁶⁾ However, it is not the intent here to prevent the varying interpretations.⁷⁾

It is still significant to note that the theorist of the relations between politics and the military, who himself supported the primacy of statecraft over that of military tactics and was willing to define war as the continuation of politics with other means solely within this context, furnished military planners the criteria for a more efficient military professionalism. The three major theses of Clausewitz's theory were removed from their interdependence and propagated individually: namely, social class politics (Lenin), an armed populace (Mao Tse-tung), and finally the decisive battle, the thesis that the generals of the world wars in Europe primarily emphasized.⁸⁾

The German military, or more specifically, the planning experts of the General Staff, played an important, historical role in developing and spreading the idea of the necessity of an annihilating or decisive battle for military strategy in the European countries. Two things are of major importance. For one, what is involved here is the modification of the principle of the military's integration within politics. A historical case illustrates this trend: It was Field Marshall Helmuth Count Moltke who prepared the way for the strict separation of political and military authority. His concept of combat in the age of modern war basically knew no restriction either in war aims or means. The ultimate, namely military victory, justified every consequent improvement of performance and the usage of all the means that could be mobilized. In the War of 1870/71, the German Chancellor, Prince Otto von Bismarck, was forced to actually attest to the military command that it was "completely independent"⁹⁾ of politics in its actions. This dimension of "pure military" thinking justified the primacy of the military in wartime. Not he himself in his writings and in his speeches, but the followers of Moltke, the "half-gods" of the General Staff, as Bismarck aloofly characterized them, dogmatized in several respects this struggle between politics and the military in the sense of subordinating the statesman's power to that of the military leader.¹⁰⁾

In order to make the necessary provisions for war, the German General Staff consequently expanded these views on the role of the military to apply to peacetime. Moltke's deliberations were simplified, stripped of their context, and were propagated, in fragments, with reference to him. Since the founding of the empire, the military's powerful, political self-assessment in times of crisis and conflict began even to dominate politics in peacetime, for civilian processes of decisionmaking proved to be obsolete just when they were needed Most.

The second factor important for the development of German militarystrategic thought is that it was emptied of its theoretical and political content. In the later third of the 19th century, a technicalized school of war was developed in the German General Staff. This reduction has often been traced back to Moltke. In a Memorandum from November 1870, he advocated that the course of military operations should take "political factors" into consideration only insofar as "they did not demand anything that would be militarily inadmissible or impossible."¹¹⁾ Realizing the circumstances of

the war of the future Moltke developed the terms "Volkskrieg" and even "war of extermination".

Perfectionalism, technicalization of war strategy, modernization of weaponry, as well as communications and command instruments all required changes in organizing, specializing and rationalizing military operations. A new type of professional officer was created to answer the functional needs and duty requirements for a mass-military organization.¹²⁾ Specialists in military planning thought in terms of conducting a victorious war following the motto "the sooner the better",¹³⁾ in order to equalize politics and military power during such a struggle for existence between nations and to strive towards an absolute military victory. This was seen as being the decisive battle.

Put in more contemporary words, the idea of securing peace by preparing for war characterizes the typical ambivalence of Moltke's thinking. However, his military successors neglected the deterrent function of the military and the prevention of war. Instead they preferred the other options, namely, solution through military conflict, engaging in an absolute, preventative war, and the preparation for a short, quick war of annihilation. There thus emerged in the German General Staff that notorious breeding-ground for the "military mind". Accordingly, the plans of Alfred Count von Schlieffen were based on the expressed emphasis of the concept of annihilation into the form of offensive strategy of annihilation that operated with the categories of military manoeuvrability, surprise and encirclement of the enemy forces.

The First World War had repercussions on military thinking. The rather one-sided preoccupation with concepts and doctrines of military efficiency became even more one-sided. We are thus confronted in post-war Germany with a new level of military thinking that flourished completely within the continuity of the thought schematism typical for Imperial Germany.

General Erich von Ludendorff was conveying his experiences from the First World War when he subordinated the political leadership to that of the military; at the same time, the maximum demands of the military for an absolute "victorious peace" became preponderant. In military thinking, everything was reduced to victory or defeat. Clausewitz's taboo that warfare was to serve politics was completely reversed:

"The nature of war has changed, the nature of politics has changed; therefore, the relationship of politics to warfare must also change. All of the theories proposed by Clausewitz are to be thrown out the window. War and politics serve to preserve the existence of a people. War, however, is the ultimate expression of a people's will to live. Therefore, politics should be subservient to warfare."¹⁵⁾

According to the popularized version of "total war" which was propagated from then on, the entire nation would both materially and morally become the subject and object of a possible struggle. This is what the term "Gesamtpolitik" (total politics) was supposed to mean. The contours of peace were to be shaped by the preparation for war.

Two representative exponents of the authoritarian state and the militarizing doctrines from the 1920s should illustrate and point out why Adolf Hitler's thinking could not have encountered much contradiction from the military. In an extraordinarily widespread and well-known publication by Friedrich von Bernhardi, the author made an abrupt break with Clausewitz's thesis by proposing the thesis that politics was subservient to the military. His rule of thumb was: "the military demands determine the political ones". This is not only a rejection of a democratic system or support for the establishment of a military dictatorship. Here the military becomes the principle of the state per se:

"Thus, the statecraft must restrict itself to paying the way for military success or to utilizing it according to the instructions that are to be issued by the military.... and the decision on what is to be done is to be left to the leader of military operations. The statesman is to follow him unconditionally."¹⁶⁾

The Army Chief of Staff of the Reichswehr, General Hans von Seeckt, exerted his military authority to make such hideous statements as that war was the "greatest enhancement of human performance" which represented "the last, natural step in the development of the history of humanity".¹⁷⁾ In his perception of things, politics and the military should have been synchronized to a certain point and "the unity of action guaranteed". On the one hand, it is certain that the German military did not go along in unison with this reductionalistic radicalization of a theory of state and war. The political crisis surrounding the generals at the end of the 1930s, particularly the Generals Halder or Beck, represent another attitude. On the other hand, the conviction won out that a military enforcement of a revision of the political relations in Central Europe was legitimate.¹⁸⁾

Adolf Hitler himself did not need to revolutionize military thinking. Naturally, his concept was contrary to that of Clausewitz's teachings. His polarized thinking of victory or annihilation, of world power or destruction in this uncompromising form might be a further intensification or climax. Hitler adopted the thesis of total war. From Schlieffen's concept of a struggle or annihilation, from the absolute Cannae of the turn of the century, it was really not a big step to the "final victory" of military offensive strategies of the 1930s.¹⁹⁾ The absolute "Volkskrieg" (people's war) was declared to be the final and only option for organizing the entire society beginning in peacetime. Friedrich Meinecke saw in such thinking the actual root of the problem that would eventually lead to the German catastrophe.

2. Alternative Military Approaches

Contemplating future wars has always been one of the genuine tasks of military planners and strategists. The chance for new impulses has often come following wars, especially wars that were lost. In the early 1920s it was German officers of the (secret) General Staff who designed an unconventional and unusual solution for the defense of Germany. They dared to develop a concept that corresponded little to the established military doctrines.

In 1924, the chief of the Heeresabteilung (Army Division), Joachim von Stülpnagel and the chief of the Heeres-Organisationsabteilung (Army Operations Division), Erich

von dem Bussche-Ippenbun, began in the Truppenamt (Office of Troops) to analyze the political situation and the military potential of the German Reich. Their realistic analysis of the given superiority of strength of the foreign powers considered to be enemies in East and West forced them to admit that a traditional, operationally aggressive defense conception with the goal of annihilating the enemy was indeed desirable, but could hardly be carried out successfully.²⁰⁾ The reality of the situation demanded more suitable solutions. What was involved was "a new school of thought" that needed to divorce itself from the established versions of military strategy of the time: "Since I myself am trained militarily in the Schlieffen tradition, it has made it very difficult for me to have to speak out against its practical application."²¹⁾ And von Stülpnagel cited the old authorities in order to justify his views. He urged the General Staff officers to "study very closely Moltke's view, the man who coined the phrase of defense being the stronger form of combat."²²⁾

This new school of thought was called the "strategic defensive", since it had to overcome the reservations raised in conjunction with the annihilation strategy of the past. It was replaced by a sort of strategy of exhaustion, in which the resistance of the enemy troops was gradually to be worn down after an invasion. Since it was considered to be militarily the weakest army, the German Army needed to be radically restructured in order to prepare for a suitable defense. The preventative and deterrent function of the concept was based on the prerequisite of an intensive defense directly at the nations borders. The important thing was to demonstrate the credibility of defense readiness.

Every enemy was to be convinced that Germany would very actively defend itself and that the military occupation of its territory would not be successful. Thus, in addition to the intensive border defense, the concept was developed for a comprehensive defense of the interior and planned as an "area war in the deepest regions of the interior". By way of a decentralized system of stationing troops according to principles and forms of guerrilla warfare, by taking advantage of the geographical circumstances and by preparing the suitable communication structures, regular warfare was to be made possible as a type of mobile, regionalized defense "from behind the enemy's back".

The tasks of a strategic defensive required a militia-type of organization of the army as existed during the Weimar Republic in the military organizations of the "Grenzschutz" (border defense troops) and "Landesschutz" (regional defense troops). These regionally based troops had the tactical task of defending without the classical battlefront of earlier strategies. This was to be combined with another type of army, namely a professional army of career servicemen and short-service volunteers which should be identical with the existing Reichswehr. The militia-like army reserves and the classical army structure would be combined in this concept in a form of mutual complementarity. The professional army would hinder the enemy to a degree from advancing further into German territory by means of concentrated counterattacks of a limited scope with narrowly-defined missions. While the professional army reacted against the invading enemy with "sudden offensive blows", the militia army would conduct "guerrilla warfare from behind the enemy's back".

The integrated strategies of these two differing military structures aimed at guaranteeing a credible defense. In order to apply the principle of the strategic

defensive at the operative and tactical levels, all questions of training, dislocating, doctrines and motivation would have had to have been modified. The combined army of professionals and reservists, each with their respective military capabilities and missions, served the purpose of undermining the superiority of an enemy of deterring and preventing him from undertaking an invasion. The strategy of the defensive has been underestimated and forgotten in historiography because the offensive rearmament that was ascertainable by the end of the 1920s obstructed any further reflection on this special development of military-strategic planning.

Due to the destruction resulting from the war, it is no accident that after the Second World War the national security dilemma (Wohn Herz) was evident in the Federal Republic of Germany. Following the founding of the Federal Republic, in 1950 intensive governmental planning for the development of the West German Armed Forces began.²³⁾ For many former officers, this was the opportunity to discuss internally which form of defense was possible or necessary in the Western half of Germany.

Generals, who perceived themselves as pragmatists and veterans of the front, entered the discussion and proposed alternative defense concepts - "totally without traditional prejudices". The break with the concept of the annihilating battle, which had been advocated during the Second World War, became clear as the former "general of tank troops" Leo Baron Geyr von Schweppenburg, voiced his support for a military structure based on a militia organization, namely "short-term service of the type found in the Swiss militia system", in combination with a small professional army of volunteers. For reasons of military efficiency - and such was the WWII front experiences of these officers - and of economic rationality, they promoted this concept of a new military structure, even for a "militia-like training of the tank troops".²⁴⁾ The rejection of the traditional operative and tactical strategies was very definite, and the devastating judgement was passed that such thinking could be generally "junked".

The first national security advisor of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the former "general of tank troops", Gerhard Count von Schwerin, did not want to participate in the "reconstruction" of the old military structures. On the one hand, he thought that a volunteer system should be the basis for building the central troops of an operative, professional army. On the other hand, he voted for general conscription as the basis of a militia army. The integrated development and deployment of these two types of armies, which were designated as being incompatible in traditional military-strategic thought, appeared to him, however, as a specific characteristic of a more modern army structure responsible to political calculation. Borrowing from Stülpnagel's alternative model from the 1920s of mobile units and mechanized border defense troops, a modern combination would fulfil the prerequisites for a successful defense. In the judgement of the "general of air force" Nielsen, these principles were even considered to be the "only possibility of fulfilling all requirements".²⁵⁾

In the "Amt Blank", the predecessor of the Federal Ministry of Defense, these deliberations were again taken up and advocated in 1954/55. Associated with this is particularly the name of the former Colonel Bogislaw von Bonin. He became well-known for his idea of blockade units of the most modern type.²⁶⁾ His defensive concept entailed a defense zone near the Eastern border that would be suitable for

the dislocating and equipping of troops, especially tank defense troops. The premise of this idea was to place West German armed forces under the "defensive portent, that is to give them ... the unmistakable character of deterrent units."

These initiatives for other sorts of defense structures, which are only fragmentally presented here, all claim to be strategic defensive. It is significant to note that these concepts were developed by qualified officers; some of them were developed in the 1920s by the General Staff itself, others in the 1950s by so-called combat-experienced battlefield officers. Their highest aims were - and this is to be underscored only once more - to secure the efficiency of military defense and the guarantee of freedom, especially the ability of the country to survive. It is precisely in this sense that they united elements of conservative thought.

3. On the Problem of Nuclear Defense in Central Europe

Nuclear war is no longer the continuation of politics with other means. Considering the given national heterogeneity of our world, the meaning of nuclear bipolarity is the point which led Raymond Aron to the conclusion that Clausewitz and his concept of war as the continuation of politics belong to "an antiquated age".²⁷⁾ Nuclear weapons alone bestow upon the principle of annihilation in a material sense the character of an apocalyptic absurdity. Thus, such a political philosophy of the hegemonial expansion of power has reached the end of the road, as Norbert Elias stated. And yet: it is precisely the immanent dialectic of politics/state and military that requires politics to again set priorities in order to overcome the hopelessness of the annihilation of humankind.²⁸⁾

The current Clausewitz renaissance is insofar no accident. The primacy of politics needs to be reinstated and the conviction that nuclear escalation is a certainty needs to be overcome. In any case, this is how to ethical-normative statement made decades ago by the churches in Germany is meant, namely, that security through nuclear deterrence is of itself "still" justifiable. It is this qualification "still" that links national security and military experts on the one side, with the peace movement, on the other side, in a mutual consensus and that calls for consequences to be drawn, so that nuclear age politics clearly and uncompromisingly orients itself towards human survival.

The debate over this issue in the Federal Republic of Germany might be conducted harsher than elsewhere and too intensive for some. The conversion of such an issue into concrete political measures requires an examination of national security policy and NATO doctrines. However, such an examination must occur under the premises of a departure from the concept of "total" defense. It is thus absurd to link this discussion with neutralism, anti-American or anti-Western thinking, or even with a supposedly German unpredictability. What this indicates, more than anything else, is the will to prevent the presumed certain destruction of one's own country, its population and also that of Central Europe, if for no other reason than because the calculability of nuclear escalation and deescalation does not seem reliable enough. It also reveals the will to replace it with defense structures that would basically prevent the irreversible devastation of nuclear dimensions.

Why is it so difficult to revise NATO strategy and to take up these Central European objections, especially since the relevance of these objections to national security policy has been established²⁹⁾ and the international, i.e. Continental threat has become obvious to every layman since the Chernobyl disaster? Since German officers are integrated into NATO and sit in staffs in Brussels and elsewhere, why isn't it possible for alternative conceptualizations on defense to be introduced and incorporated?

A very important part of the answer to these question lies in the basic thesis of this essay. It is the tradition of such thinking, in assuming a worst case scenario, to attempt to link the hegemonial interests of the USA, the NATO defense of Europe and deterrence though nuclear weaponry. It is no accident that the strategic and operational ideas of the offensive defense developed by German General Staff since Moltke have asserted themselves worldwide. Professionalization, modernization, and effectiveness are the keywords with which the scenarios appropriate to the times of offensively planned wars were designed, conducted, indeed exemplified.

The terrible thing this is that the attractiveness of the Prussian-German General Staff, its strategists and planners, and finally the victorious annihilating battles of Hitler's armies - whether referred to as Blitzkrieg or annihilating victory - prompted the Allied victors of the war in the East and the West to study and adapt after 1945 this traditional and reductionalistic concept of absolute victory. Moreover, both of the world powers recapitulated the course of the war with great effort and the use of German-Allied study groups, and examined the causes for victory and the mistakes of defeat. In the West it was the so-called Historical Division, organized by the Americans, that for many years simulated and evaluated the German General Staff's doctrines for a highly technical, mobile, and total (or global) war. And it is possible to identify effects of the Schlieffen tradition of Cannae-strategy on the strategy of massive retaliation, the difference being that the destruction is not carried out conventionally, but with nuclear means.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the old military planners in the Ministry of Defense in Bonn were convinced of the aptness of these principles when old ideal model of the classical German, military-strategic thought resurfaced again in the NATO strategy of European defense. Naturally they had to recommend these principles to the new, young General Staff officers of the Bundeswehr as being the only proper ones. In this manner, the old German General Staff perception was again being imparted beginning in the mid-1950s, via the USA and NATO strategy.

The non-theoretical, practical officers of the German military who did not stem from the General Staff and the central command staffs were the front veterans. They were the ones who typically criticized the fundamentals of this NATO defense strategy with regard to the ability of the Federal Republic to survive in the case of the outbreak of hostilities. It is in this context that the statement of General Geyr should be interpreted when he warned that the forms of defense coming from the Western countries should not be simply standardized and applied to Germany³⁰⁾ This was not an anti-Western crusade; rather it was the rejection of the reintroduction of an offensive military structure in Germany to accompany its rearmament. In a memorandum from 1955, von Bonin clearly pointed out the problematical arguments within the proper context:

"This army is an offensive force from its very nature. Of course what is meant here is not the absurd idea of an attack across the border to the East. The term 'offensive force', as interpreted in current planning, means that the response to aggression in mobile warfare will be especially that of counterattacks. An efficient, enduring defense directly at the borders is possible with such units only to a very limited degree. In case of conflict, the aggressor would have already invaded deep into the country on a broad front before it would be hindered or turned back by the counterattacks of a greater advance. All of West Germany, from the Rhine to the Eastern border, is considered from the outset to be a battlefield. The consequences of this in the atomic age do not need to be illuminated.

It cannot be the purpose of rearmament to continue conceiving of West Germany only as the approach for a mobile defense of Western Europe. The purpose also cannot merely be to increase the risk to the aggressor and to try to make any resolve of the East to attack more difficult. We consider the purpose of this rearmament to be the defense of the homeland directly at the borders in the case of aggression and to save it as much as is in any way possible from the horror of war."³¹⁾

These arguments are acknowledged more than ever before in the view of the military, national security experts, as well as that of the peace movement. And they call for a revision of the old military paradigms of total defense. The signs of the times were different in 1955. Although von Bonin only attempted to offer an alternative to be considered by the political decision-makers, it is not surprising that he ran up against a lack of understanding. The military expertise was traditional, and basically oriented to the concept of offensive defense. Experts, technocrats and pragmatists determined military-strategic thought and national security policy for a long time.

The unorthodox thinking behind the concept of the strategic defensive, as it was called in the General Staff in the 1920s, has resurfaced today in the version of alternative defensive strategies and structures and has been able to find supporters even in the Bundeswehr. Its theme is meant to be that of mutual security in Europe.³²⁾ However, this requires a radical reorientation. Perhaps in the smaller European countries - the non-nuclear countries - such a reorientation will prove to be easier once it becomes clear how much the principles of the Prussian General Staff, which they otherwise reject as the "hotbed of militarism", have been maintained. A new military-strategic conviction is necessary.

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- 32) Horst Afheldt: Defensive Verteidigung. Hamburg 1983, und vom selben Autor: Verteidigung und Frieden. Politik mit militärischen Mitteln. München 1976 and as a political concept formulated by: Egon Bahr/Dieter S. Lutz (ed.): Gemeinsame Sicherheit. 3 vols.. Baden-Baden 1986, 1987, 1988