

# Controversy over Germany's Bundeswehr

Original article: [www.ejpress.org/article/7297](http://www.ejpress.org/article/7297)

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Updated: 06/Apr/2006 18:11

## **Following the 50-year anniversary of Germany's military, the Bundeswehr, a lively debate has developed questioning the function and need of the institution.**

The 50-year anniversary of Germany's military has sparked a lively debate as to the function and need of the institution.

June 2005 marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of Germany's military, the Bundeswehr. The jubilee celebrations were marked with a combination of fanfare and protests.

In a Berliner Tageszeitung column last July, former defence minister Peter Struck wrote that "the Bundeswehr's greatest success was its firm place within NATO... that allowed it to successfully contribute to the peaceful resolution of the East-West conflict... without a single shot being fired".

Germany is one of the last major countries that steadfastly refuses to abolish military conscription. Unlike most of its major NATO partners, who have recently done away with mandatory service, German governments believe that mandatory military service guarantees a demographic and thus democratic balance for society.

Struck wrote that "the co-existence between professional and conscripted personnel has been the basis of the military's success...and that the young, average age of its soldiers has made it aware of societal changes".

Die Zeit weekly criticised the Bundeswehr for having been "founded by ex-Nazi generals". Nevertheless, it agreed with Struck's view that development of the military was "firmly anchored in peaceful missions".

Over the past decade, the German public has come to terms with the fact that its soldiers are no longer simply defending home soil – but also get stationed world-wide in peace-keeping missions. For the first time since the Second World War, Germans have witnessed their own soldiers die in the line of active military duty.

Currently, the Bundeswehr can only participate in peace missions. Recently, the federal government has allowed its soldiers to actually defend itself when attacked. However, parliament is still debating whether to allow its soldiers to actively participate in fighting missions.

## **Jewish participation**

The German military has come a long way, since the end of the Second World War. Last November, the Bundeswehr, for the third year in a row, honoured the graves of 12,000 fallen Jewish soldiers from the First World War. 80,000 Jewish men served in active duty then – many with distinction.

"That Jews fought in the First World War with pride and honour has largely been forgotten," Charlotte Knobloch, member of the board of the Central Council of Jews in Germany said at a Bundeswehr commemorative ceremony at Munich's Jewish cemetery, last November.

Ludwig Beer of the Juedische Zeitung monthly wrote that "Jewish assimilation was helped along by its soldier's volunteering in the Kaiser's armies of 1871 and 1914".

Beer reminds his readers that the 50-year-old Bundeswehr was only established for defensive purposes – an organisation "that would also defend Jews".

German law exempts Jews from compulsory military service. Most young Jewish men, according to Beer, have not volunteered.

No official statistics are taken regarding the religion and national heritage of Bundeswehr soldiers. However, several high-ranking Bundeswehr officers are Jewish.

Unlike in other NATO countries, there is no military rabbi on the payroll of the Bundeswehr. However, the defence force does have an ombudsman specially trained to deal with the needs of the country's Jewish soldiers.

Already in 1954, Israel sent a military attache to Bonn in order to purchase German hardware useful for military

purposes - a year before the founding of the Bundeswehr and 11 years before official diplomatic relations was taken up between the two countries.

Former Chancellor Schroeder said, in 2002: "Israel will get that which it needs to guarantee its security and it will get this when it needs it."

## **Flood prevention**

Now that Germany's military has defined its role abroad and that the threat from the East is gone, it must decide what to do with its armed forces on the home front.

The mass-flooding that covered southern Germany and central Europe two years ago saw the Bundeswehr in a new role – that of national guard. Troops were deployed not only to secure breaking dykes, but also to assist in rescue work and maintain order as well. The emergency that the flooding caused gave Schroeder's government no time to consider the ramifications that using soldiers on the home front would cause.

The waters have long subsided. The questions remain what to do the next time an emergency hits the nation.

Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble would like to see the military used on the home front, in order to assist in internal emergencies. He would also like to see the army support other emergency services in managing potential crises at this summer's upcoming FIFA World Cup.

Joseph Jung, Angela Merkel's defence minister has said that soldiers will not be deployed to cities hosting World Cup games.

## **World Cup**

In a NATO gathering in Sicily, in February, Jung said: "I will act along the lines of the constitution." Jung was commenting on a Sueddeutsche Zeitung newspaper report that said that the defence ministry would deploy 2,000 soldiers to support emergency services during the World Cup – this included the stationing of soldiers at vulnerable locations and evacuating injured people via military vehicles and helicopters.

Opposition members of parliament are against the five million euro bill that such a deployment would cost the government. They also argue that the constitution would need to be changed in order to give the military policing powers.

Interior minister Schaeuble has proposed legislation to amend the constitution. His proposal has been set aside for parliamentary debate. Supporters believe that the army could be used in non high-profile areas. This would give police more resources to secure stadiums and other venues, according to Die Zeit weekly.

Currently the Bundeswehr can only defend its own military bases and offices from the inside. They have no constitutional right to patrol outside.

In a Die Zeit interview, the governor of the state of Schleswig-Holstein warned against "a militarising of internal security".

NATO countries at the summit in Sicily said that they would support Germany's World Cup efforts by providing AWAC surveillance planes. The German government is not opposed to this idea. It made clear however, that a large part of the security bill would have to be foot by the FIFA organisers.

According to the Juedische Zeitung, the Jewish community has remained "ambivalent" on the issue of the Bundeswehr.