

1.4.3 GERMANY GETS TOUGH

IN A BREAK WITH THE POSTWAR PAST, GERMAN TROOPS STEP INTO COMBAT

By Katie Engelhart on Thursday, August 27, 2009

It's the "war" that no one calls by name. Instead, the German government refers to its "stabilization mission" in northern Afghanistan. And the more than 4,000 German soldiers stationed there, precluded from using the word "attack," will be careful only to speak of the "use of appropriate force." Still, this guarded language—dubbed "an aggravating semantic farce" by a leading German newspaper—is not enough to hide a simple fact: the mission that officials are too abashed to call a war is starting to look like just that.

The German government is officially rewriting its rules of engagement in Afghanistan—allowing Bundeswehr forces to adopt a more offensive combat role. "The major change," explains Christian Leuprecht, associate professor at the Royal Military College of Canada, "is that Germans no longer have to wait to be fired upon before they can fight back." Until recently, German forces in Afghanistan could not operate offensively. They could not take pre-emptive measures to prevent assaults, or even pursue fleeing rebels. Effectively, they had to wait until they came under attack. Another change addresses verbal warnings that German troops had to issue before firing on enemies. "United Nations—stop, or I will fire" was the official call: to be used first in English, then Pashtu, and then Dari. Now, those rules have been changed to let soldiers return fire—and give warnings later.

The measures might seem paltry, but they signal a meaningful shift. After the Second World War, explains Leuprecht, there was "apprehension about Germans taking too aggressive a stance" in world affairs, and the Bundeswehr was limited to defensive operations. It was only in 1994 that the military was permitted to deploy troops abroad; and even then, only in multilateral, UN-backed non-combat operations. In the context of Afghanistan, this docility resulted in a series of national "caveats": special limitations on Germany's participation in the NATO-led mission. But as these are stripped away, Germany has begun to flex some military muscle. At the end of July, officials announced that a major new offensive against the Taliban would be backed by over 300 German soldiers—their biggest operation yet in the country.

The escalation marks Germany's first military offensive since the Second World War—a benchmark that has not been overlooked. "Some are angry, while others seem almost fatalistic," the news magazine *Der Spiegel* proclaimed. "But they all agree that a psycholo-

gical threshold has been crossed." Until now, argues Markus Kaim of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin, Germans have operated in a "post-heroic" society, where "soldierly values" and displays of military pride are scorned. There have been "no photos of people standing on the street when fallen soldiers return home," he explains. Even plans to build a memorial for dead soldiers, he says, are controversial. But that is shifting, too. Last month, Chancellor Angela Merkel gave out the country's first bravery medals since 1945—to four soldiers who fought in Afghanistan.

"Psychological threshold" aside, it's clear the changes are, in part, a result of shifting conditions on the ground. The German-patrolled north has traditionally seen less insurgent activity. But Leuprecht stresses that "the threat environment is changing." Pressure from NATO forces in the south has pushed insurgents up. And foreign fighters are trickling in. The real spark may have been the deaths of three German soldiers in June that some argue could have been prevented—if soldiers had been allowed to take offensive action first. Now, in addition to giving troops more flexibility on the ground, the changes will relieve them of what some say is a constant fear of prosecution for violating a "caveat." Already in May, charges against a German soldier who killed three Afghan civilians in 2008 when their car did not stop at a checkpoint were dropped. His lawyer says that's a signal to troops that they shouldn't be afraid to defend themselves if need be.

For all the talk of a newly aggressive Germany, about 70 per cent of Germans oppose the war. But, says Leuprecht, while headlines decry the changes, the fact remains that for years NATO allies have accused Germany of passively "shirking responsibility" in Afghanistan's less hazardous north. Ultimately, Kaim thinks that the real change comes from a better understanding of the Afghan mission. People thought we were "in Afghanistan to walk little girls to school," he says, "but that's not the UN mandate. The UN mandate is about providing security." Seven years after starting the mission, he says, politicians finally get it—although they're unlikely to start using the word "war" in place of "stabilization mission."

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