

German magazine *Die Zeit* calls for reintroduction of compulsory military service

By Christoph Dreier
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A day after US President Barack Obama intensified NATO's confrontation with Russia in Brussels, Germany's second largest weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit*, has come out in favour of the reintroduction of compulsory military service.

In Thursday's edition, editor Peter Dausend questioned the direction of the reform of the armed forces, which aims to transform Germany's army from a territorial and defensive force in to an interventionist force with modern weaponry capable of acting globally. Since the mid-1980s, the number of troops has been reduced from almost half a million to the current number of 175,000. Three years ago, compulsory military service was scrapped.

For Dausend, the reform represents "security policy in a parallel universe," because the current conflict with Russia raises the question of national and collective defence once again. The need to defend NATO had "become a lot more likely with Russia's intervention in Crimea."

"Today, NATO does not end at the wall and death strips of a divided Germany, as in the Cold War, but rather on the border between the Baltic states and Russia," according to Dausend. In the case of a military confrontation with Russia, "the German army," he continued, was "hardly in a position to defend effectively."

Dausend based himself on the former general inspector of the German army and current security consultant for the German government, Harald Kujat. In response to the Crimea crisis, he has called upon the German government to undertake a "fundamental re-evaluation" of its position on security policy. "In my opinion, this means that territorial defence as the defence of our allies should be at the heart of our considerations," Dausend cited Kujat.

Kujat added on *Zeit Online*, "The career of a soldier will either become much more attractive, such as with a noticeable increase in pay, or compulsory military service is reintroduced." The latter option was more likely.

Kujat also called for a massive rearming of the German army. In the event of a Russian attack on the Baltic States, "there are not enough planes to transport heavy equipment into the crisis region," *Die Zeit* cited him saying. The German army had "too few fighter planes, too few helicopters, not enough heavy weaponry and above all too few soldiers."

Former NATO General Egon Ramms declared in the *Bild* newspaper, "We need compulsory military service. Germany cannot achieve territorial defence in an alliance system without it. Certainly not on the basis of volunteers. But we also require the necessary arms for such a case. With the materials that we currently have, it cannot be done."

The demands from Dausend, Kujat and Ramms express the new orientation of German foreign policy. At the beginning of February, Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union), President Joachim Gauck and foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party) declared at the Munich Security Conference that the era of German military restraint was over. Germany was "too big and too important" to continue to limit itself to "commenting on global politics from the sidelines."

The action in Ukraine and the confrontation with Russia are viewed as test cases for the German government's preparedness to pursue this aggressive foreign policy course.

Last Saturday, defence minister Von der Leyen told *Der Spiegel*, "It is now important for the alliance partners on the external borders that NATO shows its

presence.” The next day, she added on public broadcaster ARD that it had to be made clear to Russia that “NATO doesn’t just exist on paper.”

Other European countries are also rearming. On Wednesday, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced that he would increase the defence budget further and expand military cooperation with the United States. A total of €30 billion has already been set aside in the budget to modernise the Polish military over the next ten years.

The reintroduction of compulsory military service would have dire consequences for young people born in the 1990s and afterwards. Like their great-grandfathers in 1914 or their grandfathers in 1939, they would again be available as cannon fodder for German imperialism.

In the 19th century, Prussia was the only European country that maintained compulsory military service after the Napoleonic wars. In the wars to put down the democratic revolution of 1848, against Austria, Denmark and France, and in the First World War, millions of young men fell as victims.

The Versailles Treaty abolished military service, and it was only reintroduced by Hitler in March 1935. The Reichswehr was renamed Wehrmacht and military service was extended from one to two years in August 1936. Between 1939 and 1945, millions more died on the battlefields of Europe and North Africa.

When the new German army was founded in 1955 and military service reintroduced in 1956, there were mass protests, but it was finally in 1999 that German soldiers conducted their first full military operation abroad—sent to fight by a Social Democrat-Green Party coalition as part of NATO’s war against Yugoslavia.

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