

World

# Germany struggles with homecoming of Afghanistan veterans



Christian Bernhardt, 35, who served in the German army in Kuwait during the American invasion of Iraq, last week visited his friend and fellow veteran Martin Jaeger in the apartment complex where they live in Berlin. Both men have battled the German government for services to treat post-traumatic stress disorder. (Michael Birnbaum/The Washington Post)

By Michael Birnbaum

World

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**BERLIN — For decades, Germany shied away from celebrating its military, ashamed of the jingoism that helped spark two world wars. But as thousands of the country's troops return home from**

Afghanistan, many here are saying that old ghosts are causing new neglect.

One fix, Defense Minister Thomas de Maiziere said recently, would be to bring back a veterans day, a commemoration that Germany shunned after World War II. The suggestion is a major departure for a country where, until recently, officials did not call the conflict in Afghanistan a war or refer to “fallen soldiers,” fearful of stirring swastika-studded memories. But soldiers themselves say far more is needed.

As the international mission in Afghanistan winds down, Germany and other NATO countries are confronting the homecoming of forces who have seen some of the toughest fighting in decades. In a time of uncertainty about the future of Europe’s militaries, with spending slashed and capabilities diminished, how governments handle the Afghanistan transition could have deep repercussions on societal support for future conflicts.

In Germany, military topics are so undigested that de Maiziere’s first step was to ask whether the word “veteran” means someone who has served in combat or instead applies to anyone who has been in the military.

“German society is not really prepared for these issues, because there is no tradition of it,” said Ulrich Schlie, director of policy planning at the German Defense Ministry. “Our main concern is that there is not enough interest in our society in the armed forces.”

But the question remains an open one, in a country that has neither an equivalent to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs nor a centralized apparatus to deal with the challenges that men and women face after combat. Germany suspended its draft last year, and some worry that the switch to an all-volunteer army could further

erode ties between society and its armed forces.

“In Germany, we are not proud of our veterans,” said Roderich Kiesewetter, the head of the German Military Reserve Association and a member of Parliament for the ruling Christian Democrats.



Few discussions about the military’s status in society can avoid Germany’s Nazi past. But the conflicts of the past 20 years — in the Balkans, Somalia and Afghanistan — have slowly changed the primary focus. Germany is the third-largest contributor of troops in Afghanistan — 5,350 troops were stationed there at the beginning of the year, before the drawdown started, and more than 300,000 German troops have served in foreign operations since reunification in 1990. Since then, more than 100 have died.

The simple passage of time has made discussions about veterans less fraught. Few members of the World War II generation are around to raise awkward questions about how they fit into the broader plans. De Maiziere — the son of a prominent general who was active in World War II and postwar West Germany — has said that he intends honors to go only to members of postwar Germany’s military, which was established in 1955 and whose size is still limited to an internationally agreed upon maximum.

No greeting at the airport

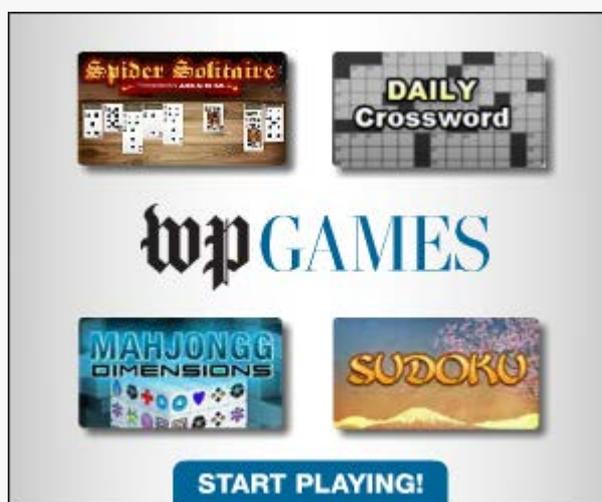
Among regular Germans, the discussion has not provoked the heated debate that might have occurred a decade ago. Instead, many seem ready to accept the plans for more recognition for the military. Still, no one is suggesting military parades down Unter den Linden, the broad Berlin boulevard that was built to accommodate that purpose.

“There’s a need for peace and peacefulness,” said David Habedank, 31, a chef who was visiting the New Guard House on Unter den Linden on a recent afternoon. Once a monument to the German military, it is now a memorial “to the victims of war and tyranny.”

“It’s okay to honor not a passion, but a kind of work,” Habedank said.

But soldiers who have served in Afghanistan say that there remains a stark divide between how their country treats them and the reception that their American, British and other counterparts get upon returning home.

“If you look at the U.S. guys, you look at the day they return from Afghanistan or Iraq. In Germany, there’s no one who is greeting them at the airport. There’s no comparison,” said Andreas Timmermann-Levanas, head of the Association of German Veterans, who served in Bosnia and Afghanistan and has pushed for a veterans day.



Treatment of veterans in the United States is far from perfect, he said, but the country has a broader awareness of the areas that need improvement.

“You discuss the problem, because you know the problem,” Habedank said. “We still don’t know the whole problem.”

And sometimes, as a result, soldiers fall through the cracks.

“I lost everything: house, car, family,” said Martin Jaeger, 41, who was driving a German military bus in Kabul in 2003 when a suicide bomber in a taxi drove up alongside him and detonated his explosives, killing four soldiers and injuring dozens. Jaeger walked away from the blast, but the devastation had a deep psychological impact. For years, Jaeger battled with the German military to have his post-traumatic stress disorder recognized so that he could receive benefits and treatment. He only recently won his fight.

“There wasn’t any acceptance that I was affected,” he said, even though he was for a time homeless, battled alcoholism and found himself struggling with violent rages and flashbacks, which he attributes to his PTSD.

Just two months ago, he moved into a government-subsidized housing complex of trim red-brick buildings that was built for disabled veterans of World War I. He and a friend are the first veterans of Germany’s modern conflicts to live there; the last World War II veteran died a couple of years ago, he said. For now, the bloody images of the attack are kept at bay, confined to his head and to the hard drive of his PlayStation 3.

Soldiers as victims

But not everyone is comfortable with more recognition for soldiers.

“In German tradition, soldiers aren’t heroes, but rather victims. And sometimes they committed crimes,” said Rainer Arnold, 61, the ranking opposition Social Democrat on Parliament’s defense committee. He has fought against the proposal for a veterans day. Arnold said that the breadth of Germany’s social safety net, with its inexpensive health care, relatively generous unemployment benefits and open access to higher education, means that fewer services are needed specifically for soldiers.

German soldiers volunteer for overseas operations. In theory, those who are seriously injured while deployed are eligible for long-term compensation, although advocates say that it can be difficult to qualify with psychological trauma alone.

Though Germany’s history makes dealing with veterans issues here more difficult than for many of its neighbors, other countries may confront similar challenges in the coming years, analysts say.

“Every country will have an issue, with a far larger number of returning veterans than they have in the past. This was the biggest NATO mission ever,” said Tomas Valasek, a defense analyst at the Center for European Reform in London. And, because of improvements in battlefield medicine, he said, many more soldiers are surviving injuries that not long ago would have been lethal —

compounding the challenges when they come home. Countries “are dealing with it badly,” Valasek said, making deep cuts in spending at the same time health-care costs are rising.

Some German veterans say they aren’t asking for ticker-tape parades, just a little recognition.

Christian Bernhardt, 35, served in Kuwait in 2003 at the time of the Iraq invasion and says he has symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder from the experience. A special day, he said, “would be a chance to say thank you to veterans. Have a bratwurst, a little party in the park. It doesn’t even cost much.”

*Special correspondent Petra Krischok contributed to this report.*

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