

# THE WORLD

## In Germany, veterans affairs in limbo

Legacy of world wars has left society unprepared to discuss the needs of returning soldiers

BY MICHAEL BIRNBAUM

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



JOHANNES EISELE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Children follow a German soldier on patrol in Afghanistan. For more photos of German troops, go to [washingtonpost.com/world](http://washingtonpost.com/world).

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



MICHAEL BIRNBAUM/THE WASHINGTON POST

Martin Jaeger, who survived a 2003 suicide attack in Kabul, struggled for years before his stress disorder was acknowledged.

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

**"There is not enough interest in our society in the armed forces."**

Ulrich Schlie, director of policy planning, German Defense Ministry

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.

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."

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Special correspondent Petra Krischok contributed to this report.

### 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 safe-

## Symbols of Syrian regime attacked

9 killed in explosions at government security compound, central bank

BY ZEINA KARAM

BEIRUT — In fresh attacks on symbols of state power, twin suicide bombings occurred Monday near a government security compound in northern Syria and grenades hit the central bank in Damascus, killing nine people and wounding 100.

The regime and the opposition traded blame, accusing each other of dooming a United Nations peace plan that has largely failed. The head of the U.N. observer mission in Syria acknowledged that his force cannot solve the country's crisis alone and urged both sides to stop fighting.

The attacks are the latest in a series of suicide bombings that started in December and have mostly targeted Syrian military and intelligence installations.

The regime routinely blames the opposition, which denies having a role in such attacks or the capability to carry them out. After other similar bombings, U.S. officials suggested that al-Qaeda militants may be joining the fray, and an Islamist group inspired by al-Qaeda has asserted responsibility for previous attacks in Syria.

The powerful blasts Monday, which blew two craters in the ground and ripped the facade off a multistory building, occurred a day after Maj. Gen. Robert Mood, the head of the U.N. observer mission, took up his post in Damascus.

"Ten, 30, 300 or 1,000 observers will not solve all problems," he told reporters Monday. "So everyone has to help us achieve this mission."

More than 9,000 people have been killed in the 13-month-old crisis, according to the United Nations.

An April 12 cease-fire agreement has helped reduce violence, but fighting persists, and U.N. officials have singled out the Syrian regime as the main aggressor.

An advance team of 16 U.N. observers is on the ground to try to salvage the truce, which is part of a broader plan by special envoy Kofi Annan to launch talks between President Bashar al-Assad and his opponents. By mid-May, the team is to grow to 100, but U.N. officials have not said when a full 300-member contingent is to be deployed.

On Monday, the suicide bombers struck in the northern city of Idlib, an opposition stronghold that government troops recaptured in an offensive earlier this year. Earlier Monday, gunmen fired rocket-propelled grenades at the central bank and a police patrol in Damascus, wounding four officers, according to the Syrian Arab News Agency.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned "the terrorist bomb attacks" in Idlib and Damascus, U.N. deputy spokesman Eduardo del Buey said.

—Associated Press

AP writers Albert Aji in Damascus and Karin Laub in Beirut contributed to this report.

### DIGEST

#### BURMA

### Opposition ends parliament boycott

Burma's main opposition party, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, agreed Monday to end its week-long boycott of parliament and take an oath of office it had resisted.

The decision came as U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon praised the country's transition to democracy and called on the West to lift economic sanctions.

Officials with the opposition National League for Democracy said the newly elected lawmakers in Burma, also known as Myanmar, planned to take their seats in parliament Wednesday.

Suu Kyi said she was not backing down. "Politics is an issue of give and take," she said. "We are not giving up; we are just yielding to the aspirations of the people."

Suu Kyi's long-banned party, which opted to boycott the 2010 general election, won 43 out of 45 seats in by-elections in April. Party members initially balked at taking their seats when parlia-

ment opened April 23, insisting that the government change the oath wording to "respect" rather than "safeguard" the constitution. —Associated Press

#### EGYPT

### Ex-jihadist group backs moderate

A former jihadist group said Monday that it will back a moderate Islamist candidate in Egypt's presidential election next month, dealing a blow to the powerful Muslim Brotherhood.

The announcement from Gamaa Islamiya provides a boost to Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh's chances in the May 23-24 vote. He received a similar endorsement from an influential ultraconservative Salafist group last week.

Gamaa Islamiya official Assem Abdel-Maged said an internal poll showed that a majority in the group supported Aboul Fotouh.

Gamaa Islamiya's support is likely to improve Aboul Fotouh's showing in the group's strongholds in provinces south of Cairo.

It also leaves the Brotherhood, Egypt's largest political group, more isolated as it moves closer to a confrontation with the country's ruling generals. —Associated Press

#### IRAQ

### Sunni vice president charged in killings

Fugitive Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi and some of his bodyguards have been charged with murdering six judges and a series of other killings, a judiciary spokesman said Monday.

Hashimi, one of Iraq's top Sunni Muslim politicians, fled Baghdad in December when the Shiite-led central government issued an arrest warrant for him, accusing him of running death squads.

He is now in Turkey and is not expected to attend the trial when it begins Thursday.

Iraq's delicately balanced ruling coalition of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds began to strain in December after U.S. troops left and the government tried to remove

#### VENEZUELA



CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS/REUTERS

Inmates' relatives pray outside La Planta prison in Caracas after riots erupted inside. Gunshots and blasts were heard after a plan for a major escape was discovered by guards, the prisons minister said.

Sunni Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlak and made the accusations against Hashimi. —Reuters

#### Missiles planned for London

Some London residents are getting troops and surface-to-air missiles on their rooftops for the Summer Olympics. British security officials identified potential sites Monday and announced

plans for security tests this week. The potential sites include the Lexington Building in Tower Hamlets, the Fred Wigg Tower in Waltham Forest, Blackheath Common, Oxleas Wood, the William Girling Reservoir and Barn Hill in Epping Forest.

#### Suspect in U.S. killings convicted in Ecuador

A court in Ecuador has found an Ecuadoran man guilty of murder in last year's bludgeoning death of Maria Pala-guachi and her toddler son in Brockton, Mass. Luis Guaman faces 16 to 25 years in prison. Prosecutors in Massachusetts had sought his extradition but were denied because, despite a treaty, Ecuador's new constitution bans the extradition of its citizens.

Mali presidential guard attempts counterpunch: Troops from Mali's presidential guard unit, loyal to ousted president Amadou Toumani Toure, battled junta forces Monday in an effort to wrest back control of parts of the capital, Bamako, a junta official said.

—From news services