



**ZMS** BW

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## **Armed Forces in a Democracy**

Extent, causes, and impact of political  
extremism in the Bundeswehr

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Summary of the main results

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- The German Armed Forces are the armed forces of a democracy. Its internal structure is intended to match the democratic character of the liberal German state and social order. The soldiers' act (Soldatengesetz) requires all soldiers to actively defend and support the free democratic basic order (Freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung). Inner Leadership (Innere Führung) – the leadership philosophy of the Bundeswehr – is a goal and value oriented concept for the position of the armed forces and its soldiers in German democracy. It is closely linked to the Basic Law and its rights and liberties which guarantee a free society. Political extremism is incompatible with the legal requirements and normative standards of the German Armed Forces.
- The study “Armed Forces in a Democracy” (“Armee in der Demokratie”) analyses the extent, causes, and impact of political extremism in the Bundeswehr.
- The study addresses three core questions: 1) To what extent do military and civilian personnel of the Bundeswehr hold extremist political attitudes? What are the causes of extremist political attitudes? 2) How does the Bundeswehr and its personnel deal with political extremism? 3) How does the Bundeswehr personnel perceive and relate to politics and society? How relevant is politics for the self-image of German soldiers?
- There has not been a great deal of research on political attitudes among Bundeswehr personnel until now. This study provides a comprehensive perspective on political attitudes, extremist opinions and their causes among the armed forces personnel in Germany for the first time on a reliable conceptual, methodological, and empirical base.
- The core questions of the study demand high methodological standards. Accordingly, the study uses a comprehensive research design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. Several conceptual and methodological measures have been used to limit unit and item non-response as well as social desirability bias in the responses of the participants.
- The study includes three modules to provide answers to the three core questions.
- An internal survey among Bundeswehr personnel (module 1): 4,313 soldiers and civilian personnel participated in a hybrid (paper-and-pencil and online) survey in November and December 2022. The response rate for the whole sample is 21.5 percent. The response rate among civilian personnel is much higher (31.6 percent) than among soldiers (20.5 percent). However, the data for military and civilian personnel is representative and robust for all relevant groups based on socio and military demographics.
- A public opinion survey (module 2): The market and opinion research company IPSOS conducted 4,632 representative computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) between September and November 2022. 2,307 of these respondents were 30 years old or younger. The measures and instruments in modules 1 and 2 were very similar to enable comprehensive comparisons.
- Module 3: The research team conducted 18 group discussions with three to eight participants at eight different bases of the Bundeswehr in April 2021 and between October and December 2022. The content of the group discussions was analysed by using the “documentary method”.
- The combination of quantitative and qualitative modules provides complementary avenues to address the research questions and facilitates robust results by applying reciprocal methodological controls.
- The questionnaires of modules 1 and 2 included instruments and questions on right-

wing extremism, political goals of the New Right (Neue Rechte), conspiracy theories and positions of the Reichsbürger (Sovereignist)-movement, religious fundamentalism, and left-wing extremism. Right-wing extremist attitudes were measured by using the German standard instruments from the Leipzig extremism-/authoritarianism-studies and the Centre (Mitte)-studies by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation. This instrument includes 18 questions in total which cover six dimensions: right-wing dictatorship, chauvinism, NS-trivialization, xenophobia, antisemitism, and social Darwinism.

- The analyses in this report focus on the perceptions and the understanding of politics and right-wing extremist attitudes of Bundeswehr military personnel. The perceptions and orientations of the civilian personnel and the general population are used for comparative purposes and as evaluative benchmarks.
- Analyses of the internal survey among Bundeswehr personnel (module 1) show that, using the standard instruments and operationalization mentioned above<sup>1</sup>, less than one percent of the Bundeswehr personnel have consistent right-wing extremist attitudes. Among soldiers, only 0.4 percent show consistent right-wing extremist attitudes. Among civilian personnel the respective share is 0.8 percent. Accordingly, there are no substantial differences with respect to the extent of right-wing extremist attitudes among military and civilian personnel of the Bundeswehr.
- Among the general population 5.4 percent of German citizens have consistent right-wing extremist attitudes. Thus, the share of right-wing extremists is considerably higher than in the Bundeswehr. Even if one

assumes social desirability bias in the responses of Bundeswehr personnel, the results indicate that right-wing extremist positions receive considerably more support in the general population than in the German Armed Forces.

- While right-wing extremist attitudes in general are rather uncommon in the Bundeswehr, there are small groups who show consistent chauvinist and xenophobic orientations. 6.4 percent of the soldiers have consistent chauvinist attitudes, while 3.5 percent have consistent xenophobic attitudes. Overall, only three out of 18 items/statements to measure right-wing extremist attitudes in the survey are supported by more than 10 percent of military personnel in the Bundeswehr. While the findings on xenophobia can be evaluated as problematic, the results on chauvinism have to be interpreted against the background of the specific tasks, duties, and challenges of the military profession.
- Additional analyses show that right-wing extremist attitudes are a bit more widespread among certain groups and persons in the Bundeswehr: people with low education, privates, sergeants and corporals, people aged 30 or younger, people who grew up in East Germany, and soldiers who belong to the army, the joint support service (SKB) or the combat troops show more support for right-wing extremist positions. However, the group differences are rather gradual than grave.
- Comprehensive models for the explanation of support for right-wing extremist positions illustrate that dissatisfaction with the political system, less support for the free democratic basic order, meaning the essential characteristics of the German democracy, and a stronger perception of limitations on freedom of speech increase support

<sup>1</sup> A single respondent needs to rather approve of at least nine out of 18 statements. In addition,

the respondent needs to partly approve/partly disapprove of at least nine other statements.

for right-wing extremist positions. (socialisation hypothesis 1)

- Positive perceptions of the Wehrmacht, negative evaluations of civic education in the Bundeswehr, support for an elite military self-perception, opposition against principles of inner leadership, and a distinctive warrior mentality also increase support for right-wing extremist positions. (socialisation hypothesis 4)
- A large majority of the soldiers perceive a lack of, or at least not enough, societal and political support for the German Armed Forces. However, these perceptions do not equate with higher support for right-wing extremist positions. (socialisation hypothesis 2)
- Dissatisfaction with service-related issues is almost irrelevant for support for right-wing extremist positions. (socialisation hypothesis 3)
- The results of the comprehensive multivariate analyses are almost identical for military and civilian personnel of the Bundeswehr and are independent of the operationalization of right-wing attitudes (political goals of the New Right, right-wing extremism).
- The analysis of the AID-public opinion survey (module 2) shows that people with stronger right-wing extremist attitudes have a higher interest to serve as soldiers in the German Armed Forces. This correlation occurs independently of the operationalization of right-wing attitudes (political goals of the New Right, right-wing extremism) and retains its statistical significance even when controlled for a large variety of explanatory factors (demographic characteristics, political attitudes, motives for occupational choice, etc.). (selection hypothesis)
- The analysis of interviews with military personnel in AID-modules 1 and 3 shows that 26.7 percent of German soldiers have noticed at least one incident with a link to

political extremism within the twelve months prior to the AID-study. 73.3 percent have not witnessed any of the events covered by the questionnaire. The most frequently witnessed category of incidents is “right-wing extremist speech” (16.1 percent). Numbers for civilian personnel are different: They have witnessed all incidents less frequently: 83.1 percent of this group have not witnessed any of the incidents within the last year.

- Perceived reactions to extremist incidents vary: Some of them are reported through the chain of command, some are settled among each other. Quite often, disciplinary or organizational consequences were unknown to the respondents, mainly due to reasons of data protection and confidentiality. Extremist content in online chats is reported most often to superiors (42.1 percent) compared to the other incidents.
- The varied reactions to all kinds of incidents can be explained by legitimate, but competing principles (obedience, service regulations, and comradeship).
- Results are mixed concerning the evaluation of measures against political extremism by Bundeswehr personnel. Only 37.1 percent of the soldiers think that the Bundeswehr has already done enough to fight political extremism. A large majority, 58.6 percent, regard civic education in the Bundeswehr to be an effective instrument to prevent political extremism. Almost all soldiers think that political extremists should be prevented from entering the armed forces and should be kicked out when they are members of the military organisation.
- Overall, the results of the study show that a large absolute majority of the military and civilian personnel of the Bundeswehr adhere to the principles of “Innere Führung”, the democratic and normative leadership philosophy of the German Armed

Forces, and the general expectations towards armed forces in a democracy.

- Soldiers and civilian personnel are more interested in politics, show higher levels of trust in state institutions, and are more satisfied with democracy than the average German citizens. In addition, Bundeswehr personnel show more support for core principles of the free democratic basic order.
- However, the confidence of military and civilian personnel in support and backing by politicians and parties, media, and the German population is burdened in general and also limited due to current perceptions circulating in the Bundeswehr (and Germany as a whole) of limitations of free speech.
- The polarization of political debates in Germany has increased the insecurity of soldiers whether and how they should position themselves politically or not.
- The study provides several indications for dealing with right-wing extremist attitudes in the Bundeswehr. Against the backdrop of the results, it is definitely necessary to keep persons with an affinity to right-wing extremist positions away from the armed forces from the outset (application process).
- The trust of military and civilian personnel of the Bundeswehr in (support by) politicians and parties, media, and the German population should be strengthened.
- Controversial topics, e.g. current issues, the war in Ukraine, or the relevance of the Wehrmacht for the traditions of the Bundeswehr should not be treated as taboo, but should be discussed and selected as central themes, e.g. for civic or historical education classes.
- The handling of events or incidents (with or without links to political extremism) in the Bundeswehr should become more transparent, in particular with respect to military cohesion, comradeship, and military hierarchy.
- The study provides comprehensive insights in the political attitudes and perceptions of German soldiers. The methodological design has proven its value and the study has delivered results that provide evidence for several measures to contain and prevent political extremism in the German Armed Forces. However, the study cannot provide empirical results with respect to extremist structures, networks, and radicalisation processes due to its methodological approach.