

11. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

Western Societies and »New Wars«

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Conference language: English

26 and 27 April 2013

Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: »Western Societies and »New Wars« since 1990«—that is quite a large topic. What are we exactly talking about in concrete terms?

This is indeed a large topic. Ultimately the paradigm shift in thinking that took place during the 1990s completely changed the political, legal and public framework of global security policy. The out-of-area deployments undertaken since then have forced us Europeans to come to grips with Europe's identity in terms of security policy—and that means we must ask ourselves to *how* and *why* we want to prosecute wars in the future. For most of the states it was their first combat mission since the Second World War; for the United Kingdom it represented the largest military engagement since the Korean War. War crimes, dubious moral and legal legitimacy, the endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the painful losses—all this led to intensive debates on war as a continuation of politics by other means. This applied to all NATO and EU states, and to those such as the Netherlands and Germany in particular, which have a very critical stance towards the armed forces.

Much has already been written regarding the changes in warfare and the new challenges since 1990. From an international perspective, it was high time to ask ourselves where we stand as well as to identify our objectives and highlight new research approaches. It is with this in mind that historians, political scientists and sociologists from eight different countries came together to discuss four aspects: the social, political and the internal military discourses on today's wars, as well as the impact of »New Wars« on the master narrative of past wars such as the Second World War, Vietnam, or Algeria.

BCZ: Are the »New Wars« really so new?

The term »New Wars« is indeed controversial. Historians are perfectly right in pointing out that there have, of course, always been asymmetrical wars. Within the

scope of the conference, the term was merely understood in the sense of the major military operations that took place after 1990, that is to say, post-Cold War conflicts. The first Iraq War of 1990/91 unquestionably marked a transition from the classic war scenario of the clash of large conventional armies to out-of-area operations against non-communist adversaries. The wars that followed—and I am thinking here of those in former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Iraq in 2003, and Afghanistan—had very little to do with the Cold War doctrine.

BCZ: What were the essential findings of the colloquium?

Perhaps the most important insight was that the Germans, in comparison with other European countries, are no exception when it comes to their critical stance to the military. In October 2005, the then German President Horst Köhler spoke of the Germans' »friendly disinterest« in the Bundeswehr—an opinion that was so often underscored by journalists that it eventually became a firmly established view. In the meantime, social-scientific research has, of course, shown that Köhler's perception of things, at least in the abbreviated form he rendered it, was inaccurate. Instead, surveys show that there is a great appreciation among the German public for the Federal Armed Forces, similar to the situation in other European countries. Only in Turkey and Great Britain is there even more appreciation. And what is more: the Bundeswehr's popularity has risen considerably since the end of the Cold War. At the same time it must be said that this does not apply to combat missions, which a large majority of the German population have always rejected and continue to reject. The situation is similar in other European countries. Most continental Europeans see the military primarily as peacekeeping forces. In other words, they want these armed forces to defend the peace instead of the interests of their own country. In the United States this is not the case. A large majority of Americans approve of military deployments as a means of achieving material and pragmatic political goals.

The generally accepted view that a rejection of foreign deployments grows with mounting casualties is also inaccurate. During the colloquium, Beatrice de Graaf and Ron Krebs showed, at least with respect to the Netherlands and the United States, that there was no direct correlation between public rejection of military deployments and the number of casualties. Apparently, the public is willing to accept sacrifices so long as they understand the reason for the deployment. Negative attitudes among the Dutch and American public were not primarily owing to casualties but to what was perceived as a lack of legitimacy pertaining to the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. But as opinion polls have shown, the

critical attitudes did not alter approval ratings for the respective military forces, which remained high, despite the number of casualties.

BCZ: In your opinion what should the goals of future research be?

Clearly the views within the armed forces. In debates over the out-of-area deployments of NATO states this view is completely underrepresented. Most publications on the subject, whether published in scholarly journals or periodicals, are remarkably lacking when it comes to theory, and the source material is not what you would describe as comprehensive. Moreover, most of these studies never address the experience of being a soldier on the ground, the tactical and operational tasks of the troops, the overall situation from a strategic point of view, or the training guidelines of the deployed units. Equally problematic is the fact that most of the discussion about soldiers' identities is very theoretical and centers around the question of what the soldier's role should be. This is not only the case in Germany but also in Italy and Spain, where they would like to see soldiers primarily reduced to fulfilling non-military tasks. But this approach does not do justice to the inner workings of the military. And so very little is known about the impact of foreign deployments and combat missions on the self-perception of European armies and on the self-image of their soldiers. It would be desirable for research on the change of values—as conducted in the field of social and historical sciences—to concentrate more on the armed forces. Together with participants of the colloquium, I would like to focus more on this area.