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When Violence Becomes Visible: The Bundeswehr's Struggle for Legitimacy in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The Bundeswehr's deployment in Afghanistan under the International Security Assistance Force mission exposed significant challenges in how democratic states legitimize military actions, particularly within a society that harbors widespread skepticism towards the use of military force. A striking feature of the German government's approach to the Afghanistan conflict was its reluctance to label the mission as a "war," reflecting deeper anxieties about how violence is communicated to the public. This reluctance underscores the difficulty democratic states face in maintaining legitimacy over their monopoly on violence, especially when soldiers are killed in action. This article applies a neo-institutionalist framework to analyze the dynamic interplay between politics, the military, and the public in the context of Germany's contribution to the International Security Assistance Force mission. It argues that the core issue was not the war itself, but the state's struggle to reconcile military violence with the expectations of a pacified society. The disconnect between formal military operations and public perception became apparent when media coverage of casualties broke the illusion of a distant, non-violent mission. This highlights the broader governance challenge democracies face in sustaining public support for military actions that conflict with societal values. Ultimately, this article explores the implications for political communication, questioning how democratic states balance transparency, public expectations, and the need for strategic narratives during military interventions.

Keywords

Afghanistan; Bundeswehr; civil-military relations; International Security Assistance Force mission; legitimacy of military force; political communication

1. Introduction

Germany's post-heroic self-image has shaped its civil-military relations in a way that fundamentally complicates the role of the Bundeswehr in contemporary military operations. Following its devastating military defeat in 1945, there was little public interest in heroes in Germany, as the country had already had far too many between 1933 and 1945 (Bröckling, 2020, p. 111). According to Münkler, the war in Europe—especially its tragic perception and ultimate loss—led to the emergence of a society in which the concepts of sacrifice and honor had disappeared. Consequently, such societies are "fundamentally oriented toward avoiding or at least minimizing their own casualties" (Münkler, 2017, p. 204, translation by the author).

What Shaw (1991) described as a post-military society for most modern Western states is particularly applicable to Germany after 1990. With the end of the Cold War, the military gradually disappeared from public view, reducing the number of contact points between civil society and the armed forces (Lepsius, 1997, p. 369; von Hagen & Biehl, 2023, pp. 53–54). However, this leaves Germany in a fundamental dilemma. The two core principles of German foreign policy, "never again" and "never alone," require integration into the Western military alliance on the one hand, while on the other, Germany's post-heroic culture of restraint remains deeply embedded in a strong preference for civilian solutions (Biehl, 2015, p. 98).

While German soldiers have participated in international interventions, their involvement in combat situations—where they must kill and risk being killed—stands in stark contrast to this prevailing societal perception of the military. In this context, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployment in Afghanistan challenged both the political establishment and German society, particularly as the mission transitioned from stabilization efforts to active combat engagements. This study investigates how the visibility of military violence during the ISAF mission shaped political communication in Germany. The core research question of this study is: How did the visibility of violence during the ISAF mission in Germany shape political communication, and what does this reveal about the challenges of legitimizing military deployments in a post-heroic society? Visibility is understood not as a mere empirical condition but as an institutional expectation: military operations must not only conform to societal norms but do so visibly and symbolically.

To answer this question, this study examines how the public and political discourse surrounding military violence evolved in response to two key events: the 2009 airstrike in Kunduz and the 2010 Good Friday Battle (Karfreitagsgefecht). This selection is particularly pertinent because these incidents saw the highest number of casualties among German soldiers (Good Friday Battle) and the most significant civilian deaths caused by German military action (Kunduz) after World War II. These cases were extensively covered in the media, remain topics of debate, and left a lasting impact on the Bundeswehr as an institution. Rather than offering new empirical findings about these events, this study uses them as a lens to explore how military violence challenges the institutional and symbolic frameworks that shape the Bundeswehr's legitimacy. It thus deliberately refrains from making an empirical contribution in the narrow sense and instead offers an interpretive, theory-driven analysis of the visibility of violence as a communicative challenge. While the Bundeswehr also contributed to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, this mission played a comparatively minor role in the public debate about military violence. German involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom primarily included special forces and naval operations and remained largely outside the public eye.

Recent political efforts have sought to assess Germany's military engagements with a focus on their strategic effectiveness and decision-making processes. The final report of the *Enquete-Commission* (Deutscher Bundestag, 2025) and the *Parliamentary Inquiry Report* (Deutscher Bundestag, 2011) both emphasize the need for concrete "lessons learned" from past interventions, particularly regarding operational efficiency and political decision-making structures. While these inquiries provide valuable insights into institutional processes, they largely bypass a crucial dimension of military deployments: the visibility of violence and its impact on public discourse. This study, in contrast, shifts the focus from strategic effectiveness to the problematization of violence as a communicative challenge. Rather than asking how military engagements can be made more effective, this study interrogates how the exposure of military violence disrupts the fragile consensus surrounding the Bundeswehr's role in German democracy.

The central argument is twofold. First, as long as military operations remain framed within the discourse of stabilization and humanitarian assistance, they do not fundamentally challenge the democratic self-image. However, when combat and casualties enter the public sphere, this fragile consensus begins to unravel. Second, democratic legitimacy requires the armed forces to be acknowledged not merely as symbolic instruments of security policy but as integral components of the state's monopoly on violence—including its warfighting dimensions. The study demonstrates that the core paradox of civil-military relations in Germany is that the Bundeswehr's legitimacy within the democratic system is ensured precisely through the absence of its foundational function (violence).

Methodologically, this study employs a neo-institutional approach explicitly addressing the problem of military violence. It focuses on the shifting and often contradictory expectations between political actors, civil society, and the military. By applying a neo-institutional framework, the study highlights the Bundeswehr's role as an institution that derives its legitimacy within German democracy paradoxically through the absence of its core function—violence. This paradox underscores the persistent tension in German civil-military relations and sheds light on the communicative challenges associated with making military violence visible without undermining the legitimacy of military operations.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the specific visual and communicative dimensions of military violence. While previous research has addressed the political communication of military missions, this study foregrounds the impact of violent imagery and its role in shaping narratives about the ISAF mission in Germany. Furthermore, by leveraging a neo-institutional perspective, it conceptualizes military violence not merely as an operational necessity but as a crucial, if paradoxical, element of the Bundeswehr's institutional legitimacy. This approach reveals that the challenge of political legitimacy for military deployments is not simply about securing abstract societal approval but about navigating the specific communicative difficulties associated with exposing the reality of military violence while maintaining public and political support.

2. The Afghanistan Mission and the Role of the Bundeswehr

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 marked a turning point in international politics. In response, the UN took action to address the political and security implications of the attacks. A central element of these efforts was the Petersberg Conference in December 2001, where four Afghan delegations convened. The goal was to fill the emerging power vacuum as quickly as possible through the so-called Petersberg Process, thereby laying the foundation for democratic elections in Afghanistan (Abu-Warda, 2024, p. 318). The Bonn Agreement, signed

on December 5, 2001, established the framework for the planned democratic reconstruction of Afghanistan (Berenguer López, 2024a, p. 89). While the pragmatic approach of the agreement is sometimes praised in retrospect (Barfield, 2004, p. 290), contemporary critiques of the Bonn Conference dominate. Specifically, the notion that the (re)construction of an Afghan nation-state could be legitimized solely through the creation of democratic institutions is widely challenged, as it predetermined the fundamental programmatic approach of the subsequent intervention without defining a realistically achievable goal (Berenguer López, 2024a, p. 103).

For the first time in its history, NATO invoked Article 5, declaring collective defense. The German government supported the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, aimed at combating international terrorism. As part of this, the first German Kommando Spezialkräfte (in English, special forces units) were deployed to Afghanistan in late 2001. The first "official" German officers arrived in Kabul on January 1, 2002. The Bundeswehr was tasked with contributing to the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan. ISAF was initially envisioned as an international protection force under a UN mandate, designed to prevent future internal Afghan conflicts. It was only in 2003 that ISAF officially became a NATO-led mission, expanding its scope and operational framework. As part of this mission, Germany assumed responsibility for Afghan police training (Neitzel, 2020, p. 488). From the outset, the German government adopted a significantly more restrained approach than the US, which was often perceived as an occupying force. Instead, the Bundeswehr portrayed itself as a partner and helper (Neitzel, 2020, p. 490). In October 2003, the Bundeswehr took over the US military camp in Kunduz to avoid direct combat with the Taliban in the southern regions. At this point, Germany was the third-largest troop-contributing nation, behind the US and the UK. Given the local conditions, it was virtually impossible for the Bundeswehr to establish democratic structures, and its soldiers frequently faced acute threats from Taliban suicide bombers.

When allied forces called for greater German involvement in the embattled south in 2006, the Bundeswehr suffered its first casualties in subsequent operations on June 28. In response, German forces increasingly withdrew and fortified themselves within their bases (Neitzel, 2020, p. 498). On May 19, 2007, three German soldiers were killed in a suicide attack at the Kunduz market, and the Kunduz field camp had been under regular rocket attacks since the beginning of the year (Neitzel, 2020, p. 504). After continued skirmishes with the Taliban, the Faizabad field camp was closed in October 2012, OP North in August 2013, and shortly thereafter, the Kunduz field camp as well. Beginning in 2015, Bundeswehr soldiers were stationed in Afghanistan as part of the Resolute Support Mission, though they no longer directly participated in combat operations (Neitzel, 2020, p. 531).

From the outset, the ISAF mission was highly unpopular in Berlin, as German officials feared entanglement in a full-scale war. Germany interpreted the Rules of Engagement differently from its allies, prioritizing the avoidance of direct military engagement by the Bundeswehr. While the US largely operated unilaterally and viewed military force as an appropriate tool (Bald, 2005, p. 168), the German government repeatedly emphasized that the Bundeswehr was not entering a war ("Wir gehen nicht," 2002, p. 8). Although only Die Linke (The Left Party) fundamentally opposed Bundeswehr involvement, all other parties represented in the Bundestag called for German military restraint. German soldiers were not to be placed in situations where they would have to use force (Jungbauer, 2010, pp. 104–105). Germany's Afghanistan policy followed the tradition of its civilian power approach, which, due to the absence of a national military strategy, gradually aligned with the political strategies of dominant allied partners (von Krause, 2011, pp. 281–282). The inspector general of the Bundeswehr, Wolfgang Schneiderhan, also sought to uphold the illusion of a

peacekeeping operation (Neitzel, 2020, p. 505) to prevent further deterioration of the already unpopular mission's public image.

A genuine political adaptation to the brutal realities of the mission only occurred between 2008 and 2009 (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 193), although Berlin still refused to acknowledge counterinsurgency as a strategic framework (Schreer, 2010, p. 106). Despite the deaths of 59 Bundeswehr soldiers throughout the mission (Bornecke, 2024, p. 1), successive German governments neither opted for a complete withdrawal nor a full-fledged engagement (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 194). Criticism of the mission became particularly pronounced after the peak years of combat between 2007 and 2009 when it became evident that military objectives never fully aligned with the politically stated goals. The fundamentally military-skeptical to pacifist orientation of German policy was incompatible with the realities of Afghanistan (von Krause, 2011, p. 284). However, Germany was not alone in its strategic struggles. Neither the Bush administration nor the Obama administration managed to develop a coherent strategy for transitioning from a military intervention to an anti-terrorism campaign and later to state-building efforts (Berenguer López, 2024b, p. 146). Conflicts among NATO partners, arising from their differing national priorities and strategic interests, prevented a cohesive and unified approach to military operations, thereby complicating efforts to achieve a coordinated strategy (Auerswald & Saideman, 2014).

3. Theoretical Framework: Institutional Logics and Performed Legitimacy

The post-heroic stance of German society is not only reflected in its skepticism toward military force but also shapes the institutional dynamics between politics, the military, and the civilian public. This interplay can be analyzed through the neo-institutionalist approach, which examines the mutual expectations and frictions among these actors. The foundation of neo-institutionalism, as conceptualized by Meyer and Rowan (2009), is the idea that organizations should be understood as a specific type of institution (Aretz, 2022). Organizations exist within an environment that imposes specific expectations upon them (Gibel et al., 2022, pp. 139–140). Consequently, neo-institutionalism primarily investigates the societal embeddedness of organizations, or in other words, the extent to which organizations are integrated into a sociocultural environment and the implications of this integration (Koch & Schemmann, 2009, p. 21; Sandhu, 2015).

Although there is no unified definition of the term institution in the various strands of neo-institutionalism (Schemmann, 2009; Senge, 2011), one core assumption remains consistent: Institutions are socially constructed programs or rule systems (Colomy, 1998, p. 266) that exist independently of individual social actors, represent societal guiding principles, and influence social behavior (Koch & Schemmann, 2009, p. 22). Institutions, as socially constructed norms, regulate the behavior of organizations. In this sense, organizations emerge based on their promise of functionality: they seem to solve societal problems and thereby contribute to societal stability. Conversely, this also means that specific demands from the environment are directed toward organizations, with the expectation that they will respond and adapt accordingly (Koch, 2009, p. 111).

Meyer and Rowan (2009, p. 31) distinguish between an internally directed action structure (what is actually done within an organization) and an externally oriented formal structure (how the organization presents itself to the outside world). Over time, organizations tend to become increasingly similar in their formal structure, as they align with societal expectations and with other comparable organizations (Sandhu, 2012, p. 77). This

phenomenon is known as isomorphism, which describes the convergence of organizational structures through normative, mimetic, or coercive processes, as theorized by DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 150). Isomorphism helps organizations gain legitimacy by conforming to the expectations and standards set by their social and institutional environment. As a result, society shapes organizations "in a patterned…almost deterministically interpretable manner" (Koch, 2009, pp. 118–119, translation by the author).

Interestingly, organizations are not primarily goal-oriented and efficient structures that optimize resources to achieve their objectives in a rational, division-of-labor approach. Instead, they are an inevitable consequence and reflection of their societal environment. Their primary objective is to ensure their survival, which they achieve by building legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 2009, p. 43). Organizations align themselves with societal expectations (Sandhu, 2014, p. 1167). Their societal legitimacy is essential for their survival, as they would lose their reason for existence without the trust of their environment (Sandhu, 2014, p. 1162). This legitimation process is initiated through public discourse, where the central societal "justification orders, institutional logics, and thematic fields" (Sandhu, 2014, p. 1161, translation by the author) of organizations are negotiated. Thus, legitimacy is not an objective entity but rather a continuous process of attribution. As Koch (2009, p. 126, translation by the author) explains: "Organizations adapt to cultural meaning patterns that are perceived as legitimate, because these patterns themselves are considered legitimate, thereby transferring their legitimacy onto the organizations." Organizations, therefore, exist in a constant state of learning and adaptation (Vollmer, 1996).

Militaries operate as subsystems within society (Mannitz, 2012, p. 6), with a distinct organizational purpose: the application of collective force (Koepp, 2021, p. 96; Kümmel & Klein, 2002). This creates a gap between civilian and military spheres (Kümmel, 2003, pp. 65–66; von Bredow, 2007, p. 96), as the military's hierarchical and command-based structure is complemented by informal group formations that foster cohesion, often rooted in camaraderie and "tribal cultures" (Neitzel, 2020, p. 19). The military's primary organizational goal—preparing for and conducting war—sets it apart from civilian institutions (Janowitz & Little, 1965, p. 29; Roghmann & Ziegler, 1977, p. 142), resulting in a distinct military culture that remains largely invisible to civil society except during publicly visible military training or wartime (Soeters, 2007, p. 269).

In democratic states, armed forces face greater legitimation pressures than civilian institutions, as they are subject to continuous evaluation and democratic control (Sandhu, 2014, p. 1161). The principle of the primacy of politics, ensuring that military power serves political interests rather than the reverse, is central to this control (von Clausewitz, 1980). However, democracies must balance military oversight with the need to maintain operational effectiveness and prevent military interference in politics (Kuehn, 2007, pp. 161–162). The question of how to ensure democratic control remains contentious in military sociology, with Huntington (1957, p. 83) advocating for a professionalized, distinct military, while Janowitz and Little (1965, p. 23) call for closer integration with political institutions and self-regulation. Yet, both approaches fail to fully resolve the tension between politics, civil society, and the military (von Hagen & Biehl, 2023, p. 50), leaving the challenge of military legitimation in democracies unresolved.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear why the Bundeswehr, as an organization, faces specific legitimacy challenges in a post-heroic environment—especially when it becomes visible as an institution of state violence (Kühl, 2018). After 1990, much of the German population was relieved that the military had largely disappeared

from public view, and even within the military itself, there was little desire to remain a contentious issue for a military-critical society at the proclaimed end of history (Fukuyama, 2006). With few exceptions, such as the Bosnia and Kosovo deployments, the Bundeswehr remained at the margins of public debate, as its relative invisibility aligned with societal and political expectations.

The ceremonial conformity with environmental expectations (Sandhu, 2012, p. 81) manifested in the progressive withdrawal of the armed forces from the public sphere and discourse: to be legitimate, the Bundeswehr had to become as invisible as possible. However, as a state institution, the Bundeswehr still needed to maintain some degree of visibility to justify its continued existence. Over time, it learned that its legitimacy was less likely to be questioned if the civilian aspects of its organization—such as rescue and humanitarian aid—became the primary elements of its formal structure and were actively communicated to the civilian public. These institutional arrangements created a legitimacy framework in which military action had to be rendered both normatively appropriate and symbolically acceptable.

4. The Bundeswehr at War

The theoretical and institutional tensions within civil-military relations become particularly pronounced in democratic states when military force becomes visible. For years, the Bundeswehr legitimized its role as an armed force primarily through its engagement in humanitarian missions and stabilization efforts. However, two specific events during the ISAF mission brought the realities of military deployment into sharp public focus. In particular, the 2009 airstrike ordered by Colonel Georg Klein and the 2010 Good Friday Battle marked turning points in the public perception of Germany's Afghanistan mission (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 209; Tomforde, 2024, p. 195). While German media had already reported increasingly negatively on the mission since 2006, mainly due to the escalation of violence and casualties (Jungbauer, 2010, pp. 111–114), images of war dominated the media from 2008 onward as the Taliban regained strength (Mader, 2016, pp. 166–168).

Media coverage played a significant role in shaping public and political acceptance of the mission, even if its influence was not directly measurable (Fiebig, 2012, p. 202). Although public opinion toward the Bundeswehr remained predominantly positive between 1999 and 2021 (Steinbrecher, 2023, pp. 275–276), there was a clear empirical correlation between media reporting, the extent of German military engagement, and public opinion: the more visibly the Bundeswehr engaged in military operations in Afghanistan, the more the public rejected the mission (Lagassé & Mello, 2018, p. 151; von Krause, 2011, p. 282). At the same time, increased exposure to images of violence influenced political attitudes, resulting in growing operational restrictions on the Bundeswehr (Jungbauer, 2010, p. 107).

Between April and September 2009, firefights between insurgents and the Bundeswehr intensified in Kunduz, making gunfire and life-threatening situations a daily reality for German soldiers (Neitzel, 2020, p. 519). On the evening of September 3, 2009, the Provincial Reconstruction Team Kunduz, commanded by Colonel Georg Klein, received intelligence reports that two fuel tankers had been hijacked—surveillance images showed people siphoning fuel. The danger posed by the tankers was particularly concerning, as just days earlier, a fuel truck bombing in Kandahar had killed 47 people (Neitzel, 2020, p. 519). Under pressure from his troops and based on intelligence suggesting that Taliban fighters had gathered near the tankers, Klein ordered an airstrike under the cover of night, executed by two F-15 fighter jets. The precision strike

destroyed both tankers, with the pilots reporting 56 killed and 14 fleeing the scene (Neitzel, 2020, p. 520). To this day, the exact number of casualties remains disputed, but it is undisputed that children and teenagers were among the dead (Heck, 2023, p. 3).

While the governor of Kunduz, Mohammed Omar, reacted positively to the decisive action of the German forces, the commander of the ISAF mission, General McChrystal, who had previously called for a more aggressive German approach, publicly condemned the strike as a serious mistake and launched a full-scale media campaign against the attack (Matern, 2009). In Germany, media coverage was overwhelmingly negative, and political pressure escalated to the point where Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung was forced to resign. The airstrike led to a parliamentary inquiry and a criminal investigation against Colonel Klein (Heck, 2023, p. 3; Neitzel, 2020, p. 521).

Images of the burned-out fuel trucks quickly circulated in the media, accompanied by accusations against Klein, who was labeled a murderer and war criminal and called to answer for an alleged massacre (Heck, 2023, p. 20). The public reaction was one of shock, driven by the media portrayal of the event, leading to the realization that as of September 4, 2009, the Bundeswehr was no longer engaged in peacekeeping but active warfare in Afghanistan (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 209). The commitment to the transatlantic alliance, which had already weakened in public opinion before 2009, nearly disappeared in the aftermath of the strike (Mader, 2016, p. 182). By this point, most of the German public had completely withdrawn support for the Bundeswehr's presence in Afghanistan (Fiebig, 2012, p. 188).

In addition to the images of the Kunduz airstrike, the Good Friday Battle on April 2, 2010, further reinforced perceptions of escalation within the ISAF mission. In March 2010, Taliban activity increased significantly, and in early April, a German paratrooper company advanced into the contested region of Char Darah. On Good Friday Battle, the Golf Platoon moved forward to clear an access road of improvised explosive devices when they were ambushed by Taliban forces. The firefight lasted for several hours, resulting in three German soldiers killed and seven wounded. The surviving soldiers were extracted by air support, but the battle was considered a defeat, and the loss of three comrades weighed heavily on the troops (Gregis, 2025). The German media reacted with intense coverage and widespread concern (Neitzel, 2020, pp. 527–528).

The Good Friday Battle was widely discussed in the public sphere, with shaky helmet-camera footage of soldiers fighting and vomiting from stress (Neitzel, 2020, p. 532) circulating online. These videos visually confirmed that German soldiers were fighting for their lives in Afghanistan—being wounded or killed in action. Since World War II, German troops had not been involved in such a prolonged battle. The political and public reaction was one of shock and reckoning: "The battle made it clear to a large part of German society that the protection of German interests and solidarity with the Allies could demand the sacrifice of the lives and health of German soldiers" (Tomforde, 2024, p. 195).

The public discourse that followed the Good Friday Battle echoed previous debates on military engagement, with some media questioning whether the Bundeswehr was adequately prepared for combat. In 2006, *Der Spiegel* argued that the Bundeswehr needed to develop a greater willingness to use lethal force (von Hammerstein et al., 2006). However, when confronted with the stark realities of combat through visual evidence, public sentiment did not shift toward greater support for the mission, instead, antimilitarist attitudes were reinforced (Mader, 2016, p. 185).

5. Seeing War: Media Visibility and the Breakdown of Military Legitimacy

This section examines how media representations of violence during the ISAF mission disrupted the institutional legitimacy of the Bundeswehr. Drawing on a neo-institutionalist framework, the analysis focuses on the tension between the military's formal structure—aligned with societal expectations of peacekeeping and humanitarianism—and its operational reality shaped by violence and death.

As Luhmann (2017, pp. 102–103) demonstrates, mass media increase society's susceptibility to irritation by amplifying the complexity of meaning structures through which society exposes itself to self-produced contradictions. Mass media can thus be understood as an institution, as they serve as an interface with other institutions, create a shared space of meaning and experience, and maintain the sphere of public discourse (Sandhu, 2012, pp. 124–125). However, previous analyses of media coverage of the Bundeswehr's mission in Afghanistan often overlook a critical issue: the visibility of military violence. Few publications—such as the work of Stahl and Ignatowitsch (2023)—focus on the actual visual content or examine the relationship between what is depicted and the reactions it provokes.

War images function so effectively because they highlight the scandal that is essential for moralization (Luhmann, 2017, p. 99), while simultaneously creating an experience of evidential immediacy (Luhmann, 2017, p. 102). With television as the medium, the harsh reality of the ISAF mission abruptly entered the comfortable living rooms of Germany in 2009, forcing a response to the suffering of those affected—because violence, once seen, cannot be ignored (Baberowski, 2018, p. 35). From a neo-institutional perspective, it is precisely the media-constructed reality of the mission that shaped public awareness of the deep discrepancy between the formal structure of the armed forces, their operational reality, and the expectations of politics and civil society. This discrepancy reflects what Meyer and Rowan (2009) conceptualized as "decoupling": while the Bundeswehr formally adhered to institutional scripts of humanitarian engagement, its actual operations revealed informal norms and practices shaped by violence and battlefield logic. These mutual irritations were reinforced and communicatively accelerated by mass media as an institution.

The images from 2009 and 2010 provided glimpses into the frame of reference of war (Neitzel & Welzer, 2020, p. 32), a frame that is not readily compatible with civilian social norms (Neitzel & Welzer, 2020, p. 179). In spaces of violence (Baberowski, 2018), distinct rules apply: formal regulations, which are central to the military in peacetime, often dissolve under battlefield conditions, being replaced by informal rules dictated by the immediate threat of the enemy. Language and expletives evolve alongside an informal normative system that frequently contradicts official military objectives (Roghmann & Ziegler, 1977, p. 172). The media-driven images of war offered a sudden, visceral glimpse into these norms of camaraderie, battlefield logic (Baberowski, 2018, p. 160), irrationalities of war stemming from an ambiguous enemy (Kuchler, 2013, p. 113), and the overwhelming role of violence in soldiers' experiences (Friesendorf, 2018; Tomforde, 2007, p. 211). However, since German society did not experience a direct enemy threat within its borders, and the rules of social communication remained intact despite German soldiers dying in combat, this disruption lacked a clear resolution.

Violence in this context was experienced as "the big other" (Žižek, 2008)—something that could neither be rationalized nor reconciled with domestic societal norms. As a result, the legitimacy of the mission itself came under fundamental scrutiny, as the media vividly demonstrated that violence is an inherent characteristic of

the military (Reichherzer, 2024, p. 171), that it is omnipresent and chaotic (Sofsky, 1996, p. 10), and that it does not conform to the standards of civilized society (Sofsky, 1996, p. 61). Since the German public's support for the mission depended on rationalized assessments of success (Fiebig, 2012, p. 201), but was confronted with the irrational, brutal reality of military operations, Defense Minister Peter Struck's assertion that "Germany's security is being defended at the Hindu Kush" (Jahn, 2012, p. 178) lost credibility. If children are killed in airstrikes in Afghanistan, it becomes clear that this is not about defending national borders or democracy.

Since the Bundeswehr's formal structure had long been framed around the defense of democracy, human rights, and national security, it was now evident that the military, as part of the state's monopoly on violence (Reichherzer, 2024, pp. 172–173; von Bredow, 2007, p. 98), was engaged in war beyond national borders, this created a rupture in the carefully constructed image of the Bundeswehr—an institutional legitimacy narrative that had been deliberately cultivated by political and military actors alike to align the military's role with the normative expectations of a democratic society. This image had been deliberately maintained by the political sphere for decades and actively reinforced by the Bundeswehr itself.

The images of violence from Afghanistan underscore that the application of military force is an intrinsic component of the escalation potential inherent in the state's monopoly on violence. The German government's fundamental stance—that casualties should be avoided at all costs (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 202)—was incompatible with the realities of the Afghanistan mission. By 2008, it had already been observed that the greatest challenge for Germany's ISAF participation lay in the killing of Afghan civilians, as this crossed a critical threshold of public acceptance (Kaim, 2008, p. 615). However, the deaths of German soldiers were equally consequential, as soldier deaths in democratic societies became matters of public concern. Military killing and dying emerge in the context of political decisions that are rooted in democratic processes (Mannitz & Geis, 2011).

This presents a fundamental paradox: on the one hand, military violence is embedded within the structures of democracy, but on the other hand, it conflicts with the post-heroic, demilitarized nature of modern society. In this context, all casualties—whether Afghan civilians or German soldiers—become "the affective consequences of their media presence" (Bröckling, 2018, p. 455, translation by the author). Every fallen soldier appears as a potential disruptor (Bröckling, 2018, p. 455), raising the issue of legitimacy for military organizations in democratic societies. Consequently, it is not merely the direct use of military force that sparks societal and political controversies (Heck, 2023, p. 8), but rather the public visibility of military violence and its consequences. Media magnify, reproduce, and eternalize the reality of death, turning images of fallen soldiers and flag-draped coffins into symbols that not only evoke emotion (Bröckling, 2018, p. 457) but also disrupt the tacit consensus of restraint that had long been shared among civil society, politics, and the armed forces. This tacit agreement was shattered when returning soldiers carried their experiences of violence back into the protected spaces of a largely pacified society (Tomforde, 2007, p. 216).

From a neo-institutionalist perspective, a fundamental paradox of democratic armed forces becomes evident: their legitimacy is based on societal and political acceptance of their formal role as a guarantor of security, rather than on the actual exercise of military force. If the Bundeswehr is perceived as a stabilizing, humanitarian, and peacekeeping organization, its existence remains largely uncontested. However, once its operational reality—the actual application and experience of violence—becomes visible, this fragile consensus begins to erode. This operational reality represents the informal activity structure of the

organization, often deviating from its formal mandates and publicly communicated norms. Thus, the media's representation of military violence not only challenges the legitimacy of specific missions but also disrupts the Bundeswehr's institutional self-conception as a civilly integrated force within a democratic society.

This implies that the military in democratic societies faces increasing pressure to adapt—it must align itself with societal expectations to maintain legitimacy. Such alignment often takes a symbolic form (public commitments to human rights, peacekeeping, and transparency) while operational realities remain unchanged. The strategy of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150) helps institutions retain legitimacy without resolving underlying contradictions. However, this adaptation primarily occurs at the level of the formal structure, for instance, by emphasizing humanitarian missions, committing to transparency, or constructing narratives that rhetorically circumvent the notion of warfare. The Bundeswehr's effort to maintain legitimacy by emphasizing humanitarian narratives reflects an institutional logic of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 1989).

The public visibility of military violence undermines precisely this carefully crafted image, intensifying the institutional friction between politics, society, and the armed forces. This places the Bundeswehr in a structural dilemma: on the one hand, it must remain an effective and combat-capable force, but on the other, it cannot fully display this capability without jeopardizing its societal acceptance. The media's exposure to military violence brings these latent tensions to the surface, transforming them into a central challenge for the institutional legitimacy of armed forces in democratic societies. In this context, the visibility of violence functions as an external shock that pierces the facade of the military's formal structure and compels a symbolic adaptation (Suchman, 1995)—an adaptation that, as the following section will show, was not effectively undertaken.

6. Legitimacy and Public Acceptance: Challenges for Political Communication

The critical failure of political communication lies in the inability to address the public's need for an explanation of the use of force. This failure was closely linked to the long-standing reluctance to acknowledge that the Bundeswehr was not engaged in a peacekeeping mission but in a war. As a result, terms such as casualties, combat deployment, and war were largely avoided in official discourse (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 197). Behind the scenes, the German government sought to reconcile the tension between the escalation of the conflict and its self-image as a civilian power by obscuring the reality of military violence. In doing so, it systematically sanitized the nature of the mission (von Krause, 2011, p. 287), and the distinction between combat and stabilization operations had already proven to be an illusion by 2006 (von Krause, 2011, p. 304).

The assumption that the primary objective was simply to avoid engaging in combat was rooted in both the lack of military expertise among civilian politicians and their limited understanding of how the military operates (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 196). Even though Defense Minister Jung publicly acknowledged in June 2009 that the Bundeswehr was engaged in combat operations, at no point was the strategic rationale for the Afghanistan mission convincingly communicated (Neitzel, 2020, p. 516). Uncertainty over how to explain military violence—and thus the inherent escalation potential of the state's monopoly on force—led to irritation on both the civilian and military sides. Rather than conveying the consequences of overseas deployments (Fiebig, 2012, p. 202), the government, while seeking public support, deepened confusion by concealing the realities of the mission.

The paradoxical demands placed on soldiers (Warburg, 2010, pp. 63–64), who were expected to act as armed social workers but also had to fight and kill, led to a significant loss of trust in political leadership within the military (Neitzel, 2020, p. 551).

Increasingly, soldiers found themselves having to justify their actions in combat, while political leaders in Berlin largely refrained from providing explanations (Bohnert, 2017, pp. 105–106). Furthermore, the military leadership itself largely remained absent from public discourse, failing to establish a bridge function between societal-political debates and the armed forces, and in many cases actively suppressing this much-needed exchange (Neitzel, 2020, p. 553). Although incidents such as the Kunduz airstrike were entirely foreseeable within the logic of warfare (Heck, 2023, pp. 32–33), the shock effect was not merely due to the visual representation of violence. Rather, it was the lack of transparency in political communication that amplified the power of these images and, in turn, further undermined the legitimacy of the armed forces. The fact that in a 2009 survey, only around 20% of Bundeswehr soldiers expressed satisfaction with the public perception of the military (Wanner, 2024, p. 239), and many attributed this perception to negative media coverage (Wanner, 2024, pp. 240–241), highlights the profound failure of political leadership to communicate the realities of military engagement transparently.

The already strained civil-military relations in Germany (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, pp. 198–199) have hindered mutual trust between society and the armed forces, which is particularly vital in democratic states (Kümmel, 2003, pp. 71–72). Many soldiers do not expect public glorification (Pordzik, 2016, p. 227) but rather seek greater societal and political support for their missions (Seiffert, 2012, p. 96). For the Bundeswehr to maintain legitimacy in its specific function as an institution of organized force, a public discourse is necessary in which society, politics, and the military all participate—as this is where the fundamental narratives and legitimacy of the institution are negotiated (Zerfaß & Piwinger, 2014, p. 1179). Disruptions to the Bundeswehr's formal structure can be minimized if its formal and operational structures are more closely aligned. However, this requires an open acknowledgment from political leadership that the military is not merely a symbolic security institution but an integral part of the state's monopoly on force, and thus inherently carries the potential for escalation. Only when this reality is institutionally and discursively embedded in political communication can the Bundeswehr and its operations be consistently framed within a coherent legitimacy structure. Otherwise, the use of military force will continue to be perceived as a disruption of societal expectations, leading to recurring crises of acceptance in democratic societies.

The political attempt to recognize the service of soldiers through the Bundeswehr Cross of Honor, the Combat Action Medal (Neitzel, 2020, p. 541; Tomforde, 2024, p. 194), and the establishment of the Bundeswehr Memorial (Tomforde, 2024, p. 193) marked a cautious shift in political culture from 2008 onward. However, this shift was accompanied by ignorance or criticism of unnecessary heroization and excessive warrior culture (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, pp. 207–208). In particular, the Bundeswehr Memorial, inaugurated in 2009, stemmed from Minister Jung's visit to the ISAF contingent in Kabul in December 2005, where he expressed a desire to create a site of remembrance for fallen German soldiers (Leonhard, 2011, pp. 131–133), ultimately failed as a symbol of meaningful commemoration. Due to its hidden location in the courtyard of the Bendlerblock in Berlin (Mannitz & Geis, 2011), it serves as a weak symbol (Leonhard, 2011, p. 137), reflecting a failure of political remembrance that restricts itself to civilian mourning and prevents broader meaning-making (Leonhard, 2011, p. 138).

Here, an opportunity was missed, an opportunity to communicate to the public the role of the armed forces, the reasons why soldiers die, and what the death of soldiers in combat signifies for the military, politics, and society at large. Political communication about overseas deployments plays a crucial role in determining whether armed forces remain integrated within democratic societies or are perceived as a dysfunctional element. The future legitimacy of the Bundeswehr thus depends not only on measurable operational success but also on an open and honest societal discourse about its role and purpose. If this discourse fails, military violence will remain an anomaly in the public consciousness, and the Bundeswehr will continue to be an institution whose acceptance is repeatedly called into question in times of crisis.

The last Bundeswehr soldiers returned to Germany in early July 2021, where they were met with little fanfare. The Taliban had regained power. In August 2021, German soldiers returned to Afghanistan once more—this time under the command of Colonel Jens Arlt—to evacuate 5,000 people from over 45 nations in just 11 days. Again, dramatic images surfaced of civilians clinging to aircraft and infants being left to their fate. Yet, the evacuation mission was a success. Arlt and his 600 soldiers were the only German troops to be publicly celebrated as heroes. A widely circulated photo of Arlt standing on the airfield, his G36 rifle slung across his chest, quickly became a symbol, elevating him to the status of a democratic military hero (Tomforde, 2024, p. 197).

In September 2021, Arlt was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit, First Class for his outstanding service—a distinction that perfectly aligned with both political and public expectations of the Bundeswehr and its role in Afghanistan:

> General Arlt put himself in danger not for our nation but for humanity and at the same time ended the difficult Afghanistan mission with a heroic deed that made us forget all the criticism, fallen and wounded, privations, [and] political and military mistakes. (Tomforde, 2024, p. 198)

This final mission signaled that everything had turned out well after all. The Bundeswehr could leave Afghanistan with its head held high—not as a combat force, but as a humanitarian rescuer. This narrative sought to cautiously mend the cracks that had emerged in the institution's symbolic façade.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the complex relationship between military force, public perception, and political communication in democratic societies, using the German Bundeswehr's engagement in Afghanistan as a case study. The analysis has demonstrated that the question of military legitimacy arises primarily when violence becomes visible. As long as soldiers were perceived as peacekeepers and humanitarian actors, they posed no challenge to the self-image of a pacified democratic state. However, when violence—whether in the form of casualties among German soldiers or civilian deaths caused by the Bundeswehr—became publicly visible, the legitimacy of the military mission was fundamentally questioned.

This leads to the first key thesis of this article: in democracies, military legitimacy is primarily contested when violence is made visible. If military operations remain within the framework of stabilization and civil assistance, they do not disrupt public expectations. However, when armed conflict and the use of force come to the forefront, society is forced to confront the contradictions inherent in its relationship with the military.

The second key thesis emphasizes that democracies can only maintain their legitimacy if they accept and communicate their armed forces as an integral part of the state's monopoly on violence, including their warlike implications. The attempt to sustain a rhetoric of peace while engaging in armed conflicts leads to cognitive dissonance, political disillusionment, and weakened trust between society, politics, and the military. Future military interventions and political communication strategies in democracies must therefore bridge the gap between formal military narratives and operational realities. A more honest, transparent, and proactive discourse is needed—one that allows society to engage with the realities of military force rather than react to them in moments of crisis.

A central implication of this study is the need for mutual learning and improved communication between society, the military, and political leadership. Military violence is not an aberration but a fundamental aspect of statehood, even in a democratic framework. War and armed forces are enduring phenomena that will continue to shape societies—including Germany. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has led to a shift in the Bundeswehr's public communication strategy. Its visibility in public discourse and media presence has increased, yet it remains framed within the narrative of peace and defense, rather than warfighting. The so-called *Zeitenwende*, declared by Chancellor Olaf Scholz on February 27, 2022, marked a rhetorical and financial shift, yet its practical consequences remain contested. Defense Minister Boris Pistorius' emphasis on *Kriegstüchtigkeit* as a necessary capability for the Bundeswehr has sparked debate, particularly in a political culture that historically avoided direct references to war readiness. Simultaneously, figures such as Inspector General Carsten Breuer and various civilian military experts have become more prominent in media discussions, further signaling a transformation in public discourse.

Despite this shift, Germany's discourse on the military remains detached from the realities of armed conflict. Even the growing political consensus on the Bundeswehr as a chronically underfunded institution—exemplified by the "whatever it takes" stance of the likely future Chancellor Friedrich Merz—does not necessarily translate into a fundamental reassessment of the role of military violence in society. The focus remains on financial and, to some extent, semantic re-armament, rather than on addressing the deeper societal and political implications of military force. Just because debt is incurred for defense spending does not mean that public and political reactions to images of Bundeswehr-inflicted violence in a future conflict would differ significantly from those witnessed in Afghanistan.

A neo-institutional perspective offers a crucial analytical lens for understanding the Bundeswehr's legitimacy crisis in Afghanistan. By distinguishing between an organization's formal structure—the publicly communicated role of the Bundeswehr as a stabilizing and humanitarian force—and its actual operational structure, which involves combat and the use of force, this approach highlights the core tension in democratic military legitimacy. The Bundeswehr's legitimacy depended largely on maintaining a facade aligned with societal expectations of a pacified military force. However, when its active structure—the realities of combat and violence—became publicly visible, this institutional alignment collapsed, triggering public disillusionment and political distancing.

From a neo-institutional perspective, democratic armed forces must continuously adapt to societal norms to maintain their legitimacy. However, Bundeswehr's case illustrates the limits of such adaptation: when political narratives fail to integrate the reality of military force into their institutional framework, moments of crisis—such as the Kunduz airstrike or the Good Friday Battle—lead to intensified legitimacy struggles. This study

thus underscores the importance of aligning formal military narratives with operational realities, as well as the need for a political discourse that does not shy away from acknowledging the full implications of military force.

While this article engages with broader theoretical discussions on democracies and military legitimacy, its primary focus remains on Germany. Due to its historical burdens, unique political culture, and deeply rooted skepticism toward military force, Germany represents a distinct case that cannot be automatically generalized to other democracies. The findings presented here should therefore be understood within this specific national context, rather than as universally applicable conclusions about democratic civil-military relations.

Several questions remain open for further investigation: how can political and military leaders effectively communicate the realities of warfare without alienating democratic societies? How do different democracies handle the visibility of military violence in their public discourse? How can media strategies be optimized to effectively manage the legitimacy of military interventions? Addressing these questions will be crucial for ensuring that democratic societies do not merely tolerate their armed forces in peacetime but accept them as necessary actors in both defense and conflict.

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