

Military historian Sönke Neitzel talks to International Reports about unrealistic longings for peace and the atrophy of security policy thinking in Germany – and explains why only the US can ensure Ukraine’s survival.

International Reports (IR): Mr Neitzel, you are currently the only professor of military history in Germany. Does that say something about the country?

Sönke Neitzel: Yes, that certainly says something about the country. We have around 200 professorships in gender studies – and just one in military history. And in the area of political science, there are precisely three that deal with security policy in the narrower sense. Obviously, I would like to see more in this field.

IR: Why so few professorships?

Neitzel: The university milieu takes little interest in questions of war and peace. And when they are interested, they tend to be extremely normative. Since the 1970s, we have had some lavishly funded institutes for peace and conflict studies, which for years have aired an overly idealised view of the world. And, undoubtedly, the academic world’s frame of reference is also reflected in the denomination of chairs. How could it be otherwise?

IR: Are things very different in other countries?

Neitzel: Yes and no. If we just look at chairs that explicitly identify military history as part of their work, then there are very few throughout Europe. But other professorships often deal with the subject, even if they are not denominated as such. The situation is certainly best in the UK, which has a long tradition of War Studies. What is different about Germany is not so much that there is only one professorship in military history, but that the subject as a whole plays such a minor role in history studies.

IR: Let’s move away from universities and look at society as a whole. How would you describe the German citizens’ relationship to the military?

Neitzel: We need to distinguish between the Bundeswehr in particular and the military in general. The German citizens’ relationship to the military is certainly reticent, particularly with regard to the past. When Germans think of the military, it is the Second World War, the Holocaust, and Nazi crimes that dominate. But when the public is asked about its attitude towards the Bundeswehr, surveys show that Germans view it in a positive or very positive light, at least in recent decades.

IR: You mentioned a certain reticence with regard to the military. But can't this also be viewed as a strength – for example, because it goes hand in hand with a high regard for diplomacy?

Neitzel: It was never the case that the German people were

generally against the military. We just tend to be more aware of people who voice their criticism – consider, for instance, NATO's dual-track decision. But in doing so, we overlook the hundreds of thousands who joined the Bundeswehr and said: we need the military to defend us. And if we look at what the German state spent on the military during the Cold War – three to four per cent of GDP – we cannot say that the country generally has a distanced relationship to the military.

Now to the issue of diplomacy: for the most part, diplomacy alone cannot fix things. The excision of the military from political thinking began in the 1990s. And one can have different opinions about the success of this orientation. I would say that the West and Germany failed miserably in Yugoslavia. We ended up watching massacres like the one in Srebrenica. Europe – although it had a million armed troops and a thousand fighter planes – failed to end this civil war. It was the Americans who did that. One does always need a variety of items in one's toolbox. A wise policy consists of diplomacy, economic measures, and military means – then it's a case of deciding what to use in which situation.



Ambivalent relationship: While many Germans view the military as such with reticence, the majority has a positive to very positive opinion on the Bundeswehr. [Source: © Hannibal Hanschke, Reuters.](#)

IR: And this toolbox isn't fully stocked in Germany?

Neitzel: It's one thing to say that this country wants to renounce war. But the other is the question of what we actually do when other countries use war as a political means. As we see with regard to Vladimir Putin, we have completely forgotten how to take war into account as a real possibility. Looking at the situation in Ukraine, the mistake didn't lie in reaching out to Putin and offering him the chance to cooperate. The mistake was failing to make any provision for the worst-case scenario – that Putin would head down the path of war.

IR: In the weeks after the start of the invasion, there was a public debate in Germany about the proper response to the war. This included open letters containing arguments that were sometimes in favour of, and sometimes against a stronger commitment to helping Ukraine on the part of Germany and its allies – particularly with regard to supplying weapons. In an opinion piece in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in July, you yourself, alongside other experts, advocated a tough stance towards Russia. Why was that?

Neitzel: First of all, none of us knows how the situation will develop. We can only work with plausibilities and assumptions, which of course are also based on our professions and attitudes. For me, the crucial question is: do we believe that we can achieve anything with negotiations at this point? At the moment, I don't see any sign of Putin being ready to negotiate in earnest. He has no need to do so. Moreover, it would be simply unacceptable for Ukraine to be locked into the current situation. The country would be entirely at Russia's mercy. Putin would see this as confirmation that a war of aggression is indeed worthwhile, and he would even have this reward sanctioned by a fearful West.

In addition, if Germany were to propose negotiations now, it would completely isolate itself in Europe. It would divide Europe and lose the last of its credit with the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Taking such an action would be a gift for Putin.

IR: It seems to us, at least, that the debate about a potential end to the war is often characterised by wishful thinking and a fair portion of naivety. Little attention is paid to research findings on the prerequisites for successful negotiations. Do you have the same impression? And if so, can you explain the phenomenon?

Neitzel: The debate is not about scientific knowledge, but about emotions. What becomes clear here is the desire for peace. This is very understandable, but in my opinion has little to do with reality. Most argue without knowledge, unaware of the latest findings on issues such as the dynamics and endings of wars. If, as in my case, one has studied war for decades, such opinions seem a little perplexing.

IR: In what way?

Neitzel: Wars are first and foremost about imposing one's will on the opponent by military means. Put simply, wars end when this has been achieved, or when the military means are no longer sufficient to achieve the goal. Then, there can be a compromise, such as a peace agreement or a ceasefire, and we have seen many different variants of these in the past. I see no sign that Russia has reached this point. And this is what I mean: we have completely lost the ability to read wars. It is clear that we are all in favour of peace. But our ability to engage with the subject of war is not particularly strong. In this country, we have comparatively little expertise in this area. This applies to academics and politicians alike.

IR: Someone who undoubtedly has expertise in this area is Carlo Masala, professor at the Bundeswehr University in Munich. During the summer, in the face of calls to finally negotiate with Russia to make "peace", he tweeted: "It does scare me how little some parts of society are prepared to defend themselves." Do you share this fear?

Neitzel: Of course, Germany is in a different situation than Ukraine. The Russian army is not east of Berlin at the Seelow Heights. If that were the case, the discussion would be different. But overall, I share my colleague's concern. I combine this with the finding that we have simply glossed things over for far too long and indeed lived on illusions and wishful thinking. Waking up now is very painful – and some people want to cling on to the old illusions.

IR: Surveys show that the majority of Germans are quite willing to accept restrictions, such as higher energy prices, if it helps Ukraine. On the other hand, the European Council on Foreign Relations conducted a survey in ten European countries to discover how people felt about the war in Ukraine. The results revealed that when people were asked if they preferred immediate "peace" at the expense of concessions from Ukraine, or whether they believed that peace could only be secured in the medium and long term if Russia was now firmly stopped, then the "peace at any price" camp won in every country except Poland – and Italy is the only country where this view was more prevalent than in Germany. Can we as a society stand up to Putin's Russia, or does the Kremlin just have to sit back and wait for the democratic mechanisms to kick in and for the public's desire for peace to be fully translated into government policy?

Neitzel: I think Germans are more resilient than some politicians believe. But a great deal depends on crisis management, communication, and clear action. It is apparent that we are more divided in our overall attitude towards Russia than the UK, for example. In the eastern parts of Germany, for historical reasons, we simply have a different attitude towards this. Nevertheless, I believe that the majority of the population is quite willing to accept restrictions if they understand the point of them and feel that the government is steering them skilfully through the storm.

IR: The keyword is communication. So, in this context, is it perhaps necessary to explain more clearly why supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression is so important and also in our own interest?

Neitzel: That is actually being done. The arguments are well known. If we accept this breach of the rules, things could snowball. We cannot then rule out threats to the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia or maybe even NATO countries. I think most people understand that.

But, as far as I am concerned, it's also important not to overdo the discussion, and to allow for different opinions. For example, people should also be allowed to criticise Ukraine – such as the influence of its oligarchs – without being branded a traitor. It should be permissible to say that Ukraine has different ideas to us on certain issues. I believe this only strengthens the credibility of the discussion. But my argument is also that if we as NATO countries no longer support Ukraine, it will cease to exist. This would be a ground-breaking precedent in recent European history. We cannot allow that to happen.

IR: Germany is often accused of having been too hesitant towards Russia in the past. After the Russian attack on Ukraine in February, Chancellor Scholz attracted much attention with his Zeitenwende speech. However, many observers felt that the expectations that it raised, including internationally, were quickly dashed. Do you share this view?

Neitzel: Scholz gave a great speech that also resonated in Europe and at NATO. Add to that the 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr, and Germany had plenty of capital to build on. But since then, it has become clear that, although the 100 billion are certainly good, the Germans are actually behaving as they always do. They look at what others are doing, let others take the lead. In diplomatic parlance, this means: “we coordinate our efforts”. If the Netherlands supply five self-propelled howitzers, Germany supplies seven. They spent months talking about encouraging other NATO countries to deliver heavy weaponry to Ukraine, with Germany promising to replenish their stocks – an operation known as *Ringtausch*, or “circular exchange” –, but all it came down to was 14 Leopard tanks. Germany is doing something, but still too little in relation to its size, financial strength, and importance. At least, that's the perception in Central and Eastern Europe and – behind closed doors – also within NATO. It is also my personal opinion – Germany could do much more.

IR: So, you would like to see a much more proactive Germany that takes the initiative?

Neitzel: Germany could be a driving force. But on security issues, it has never been. Think of the euro crisis and what a strong role former Finance Minister Schäuble played at that time. Now compare that to the country's role in the current crisis. There is a huge difference. This is a major problem, particularly for people in Eastern and Central Europe, who are really afraid. Whether Ukraine survives this war or not depends on the US, and possibly on the UK. But not on the EU member states, and certainly not on Germany. That's 450 million EU Europeans – a shameful fact.

Neitzel: Germany could be a driving force. But on security



IR: Now, however, one thing is unmistakable: the Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised the profile of security issues, at least in the public debate in Germany. People are willing to reconsider old certainties, for instance, when they increasingly recognise the importance of military deterrence in preventing war and aggression. Others still find this very difficult or fall back into old ways of thinking. In the extreme case, the discourse on security policy is discredited outright as "bellicism". Do you think Russia's attack will lead to a greater focus on security policy in the public discourse?

Neitzel: At the end of the day, this question

is really about whether we will see a change in Germany's political culture. Political cultures can change; in our country, this has happened several times over the past 150 years. But I would be surprised if we were to experience a real turnaround in the area of security policy – in a cultural no-man's land, so to speak. Today's discourse has been triggered by current events. When the topicality changes, the news will focus on other issues. Then the question will be whether security policy issues have really been anchored within universities, social elites, and political parties – whether there is a new awareness, whether we will even see a realignment of key political and academic positions. But I don't really expect that to happen. The people who are currently deciding on new appointments in universities or political parties will not change their minds overnight. Fundamental change would be very desirable, but I find that hard to imagine.

IR: Finally, Professor Neitzel, let's once again cast an eye to the future. You have already said that, unfortunately, the war in Ukraine is not likely to end very soon. And even if there were some kind of ceasefire, the conflict with Russia would not be over. Many believe that the conflict cannot be ended structurally without regime change in Russia – to a regime that is more interested in cooperation than in imperial expansion and hostility to the West...

Neitzel: ... or unless the Russian forces are defeated and fall apart. But that's not to be expected in the foreseeable future, even after the recent Ukrainian successes...



President Volodymyr Zelensky addresses members of the US Congress. "Whether Ukraine survives this war or not depends on the US", underlines Professor Sönke Neitzel. Source: © Adama Diarra, Reuters.

IR: ... that means we have to be prepared for this conflict to shape the next few years, and in the worst case even the coming decades. Then there's China, another power that challenges the West. Can history teach us how to stand up to these authoritarian revisionists?

Neitzel: Every conflict is different and plays out under new circumstances – and we only learn from history what we want to learn and what suits our political stance. We see history as a kind of rummage table from which we pick the argument that suits us best at any given moment.

What advice can one give as a historian then? It certainly depends on the unity of NATO countries in every area of action: economic, political, and military. And we need a realistic view of the world. What can we achieve? What can we not?

That might sound trivial, but it is very difficult to put into practice. For decades now, the EU has lacked unity and a realistic view when it comes to foreign and security policy. Europe is still completely dependent on the US in terms of security. And I don't see any progress being made, for instance on armament. We can only hope that this will go well. But should the US one day decide to deprive Europe of its nuclear shield, Europe would be vulnerable to blackmail. The UK and France cannot really protect us in such a scenario.

IR: What can be done to improve this rather depressing situation?

Neitzel: We can do something. History is yet to be written. For example, we need a German government that takes decisive action. The Bundeswehr has to be capable of waging a defensive war. And, at European level, we have to cut the Gordian knot. Europe spends enough on defence, but it needs to organise itself differently. For this, we need a great European – a Helmut Kohl, Charles de Gaulle, or Konrad Adenauer – who has the strength to achieve the seemingly impossible. We need leaders who will finally take massive action.

The interview was conducted by Sören Soika and Fabian Wagener – translated from German.

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