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Review Article

Militarization and Authoritarianism: The Psychopolitics of War Readiness

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Abstract

Drawing on the current German discourse surrounding war readiness, this article conceptualizes militarization as a mode of subject formation and a form of psychopolitics that influences the psychosocial foundations of society. Building on Erich Fromm's psychoanalytical-Marxist theory of "Escape from Freedom," which conceives of authoritarianism, destructiveness, and conformity as psychosocial reaction patterns to isolation, fear, and feelings of powerlessness, this article examines how subjects are militarized. Accordingly, the current discourse on combat readiness not only leads to the acceptance of an increasing political orientation toward war or heightened military combat readiness, but also lays the essential foundations for authoritarianism.

Introduction

"Never again war! Never again fascism!" became the guiding principle of German state policy in the wake of the devastation wrought by National Socialism and World War II, enshrined in the Basic Law as the "commandment of peace": "Acts that are capable of and are undertaken with the intent to disrupt the peaceful coexistence of peoples (…) are unconstitutional" and "shall be made punishable" (Art. 26 GG). Since the "Zeitenwende" (turning point) proclaimed by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz in 2023, however, "war readiness is considered the guiding principle" (BMVg [1]). According to the "2023 Defense Policy Guidelines," this requires, in particular, "soldiers who have the will to bravely defend the rights and freedoms of the German people while consciously accepting the risk to life and limb" (BMVg [1]).

Yet to date, only a minority of Germans demonstrate the desired "willingness to fight with the expectation of success" (BMVg [1]). According to a recent survey, 16% are "definitely" willing to defend Germany with arms, another 22% of the roughly 1,000 respondents are "probably" willing, while a total of 59%-72% of women- are "probably not" or not at all willing to do so (Die Zeit [2]). So obviously political and media discourses on "military readiness" and "mental rearmament" address a sceptical population.

But how is combat readiness established? What are the psychosocial and political consequences of militarization? How does militarization alter the psychopolitical foundations of society? Building on these questions and the German discourse, this article, following Critical Theory, focuses on the militarization of subjects. After all, militarization is not limited to increased military spending or economic restructuring, but represents a complex sociopolitical process (see Enloe [3]) that permeates all areas of society and targets subjects in particular.

To grasp the militarization of subjects, following an introductory outline of the central discursive strategies surrounding war readiness, I draw upon Erich Fromm's psychoanalytical-Marxist analysis of the psychosocial effects of isolation, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness. Contextualized within neoliberal capitalism and expanded to include several elements of current psychoanalytic

social diagnosis, I finally examine the formation of militarized subjects. Militarization, as it turns out, ultimately constitutes a form of psychopolitics that not only lends acceptance to the increasing political orientation toward war, but also lays the essential foundations of authoritarianism.

Discourse Strategies: Enemy and Cowardice

Although Defense Minister Boris Pistorius had already, in October 2023, completely ignoring history, called for war readiness in a ZDF interview (Pistorius [4]), when he elaborated in the Bundestag in June 2024: "We must be war-ready by 2029" (Bundestag [5]), he turned the vague possibility of a Russian attack on Germany or another NATO country into an apparent certainty-even though, apart from unspecified "intelligence reports," there is a complete lack of evidence for such a claim. NATO's military spending is many times that of Russia's; NATO is far superior to the Russian army in terms of all types of military equipment and, with a total of 3.4 million active-duty soldiers, to the Russian army with around 1.2 million soldiers (Statista [6]). The European NATO countries alone have significant advantages in troop strength and all heavy weapons, with the exception of nuclear-capable strategic bombers (see Lurz et al. [7]). Why would Russia attack such a superior adversary?

Yet since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian politics has been characterized in public discourse as aggressive, imperial, expansionist, and deeply irrational. The geopolitical context of the war in Ukraine, the strategic weakening of Russia pursued by the U.S. since the 1990s, and NATO's eastward expansion (see Brzeziński [8]; Mearsheimer [9], Neff [10]), as well as its immediate prehistory, are usually left out of the discussion. An analysis of coverage of the war in Ukraine in eight leading German media outlets shows that 93% of the 4,292 articles examined articles attribute sole responsibility for the war to Russia, and 71% cite the pursuit of great-power status as the motive for the attack, while only 28% mention Ukraine's intended NATO integration (Maurer et al. [10]). Russia is portrayed almost exclusively in a negative light and fundamentally neutral formats such as news and reports barely distinguish themselves from opinion-driven commentary or feature stories (Maurer et al. [10]).

Building on a long tradition of Russophobia (cf. Hofbauer [11]), Russia becomes the epitome of the dangerous enemy, and its president, repeatedly equated with Hitler, is stylized as the incarnation of evil. In the fight against "Eastern despotism," the civilizational superiority of Western democracy must prove itself. Accordingly, both politicians and the media are relying not on diplomacy but on military "solutions" to the war in Ukraine. Thus, in the analysis by Maurer et al., "Der Spiegel" was "the only one of the media outlets examined (…) that viewed diplomatic negotiations more positively than the delivery of heavy weapons" (Maurer et al. [10]).

While a willingness to engage in dialogue and nuanced positions in the discourse are defamed as sympathies for dictatorship by "Putin sympathizers" and as signs of "deep-seated anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism" (Neitzel 2024), pacifism is equated with cowardice and naivety (Bauer [12]). In this context, universities in particular-where a "peace-ethical bias" still prevails and "the discourse has changed the least"-find themselves in the "crossfire" of criticism, for "especially in the humanities, there is still a pacifist milieu" (Neitzel [13]). The civil clause of academic institutions , which excludes research for military purposes, is to be abolished as "no longer appropriate" (Der Spiegel [14], Leggewie [15]); in Bavaria, it was already banned in 2024 (GFB [16]). At the same time, the supposedly "highly funded" peace research is attacked for a lack of realism, and the usefulness of "war studies" is touted (Neitzel [13]).

While images of war generate emotions on social media (Prattes/Saborowski [17]), military personnel and experts are increasingly explaining the global situation on television and in the press, thereby gradually normalizing military ways of thinking and terminology. Terms like "heroes," "casualties," military "honor," or "bravery" are increasingly normalized, while "negotiations" are sometimes placed in quotation marks in the press (Käßmann [18]). Even the concept of war readiness carries entirely different connotations than defense capability or even a willingness for peace. It opens up a positively coded associative space and normalizes warfare by making it appear as a task that is virtually desirable (cf. Melzer 2024).

Instead of "readiness for war," however, the Bundeswehr's self-presentation emphasizes career opportunities, "never-ending" camaraderie, selflessness, the adventure aspect, helping others, and "doing good"; violence and destruction are downplayed (National Veterans' Day 2025a). Surrounding Veterans Day, held for the first time in 2025, which is intended to "strengthen the bond between the Bundeswehr and society" (National Veterans Day 2025a), the emphasis-in addition to celebrating "together, shoulder to shoulder"-is not only on honoring the "heroes" of the battlefield, but also on gratitude in light of their willingness to make sacrifices, such as those who gave "everything for our freedom" (National Veterans Day 2025a) or "the utmost for others" (National Veterans Day 2025b). War thus appears-counterfactually-as part of immutable human nature, as a constant in human history, and entirely as a matter of course (cf. Jahn [19]; Fromm [20]).

Threat narratives and enemy construction, decontextualization, de-thematization, and emotionalization in the context of media coverage of the war in Ukraine, the defamation of pacifism, the generalization of military terms and ways of thinking, as well as their positive re-connotation, thus dominate the discursive strategies surrounding war readiness. What consequences do they entail? How do they affect the subjects?

Psychosocial Dynamics: Isolation, Fear, and Powerlessness

To characterize the psychosocial dynamics that trigger such war rhetoric and the construction of enemy stereotypes, I draw on Erich Fromm's analysis of culturally significant mechanisms of psychological processes, as developed in "Escape from Freedom". Fromm begins with the contradictions inherent in individual freedom. The liberation from the social bonds of the premodern

era, which for individuals meant restrictions but also security, brought, according to his thesis, negative freedom (freedom from), but not positive freedom (freedom to): The unfolding of the self, "the expression of (...) intellectual, emotional, and sensuous potentialities" (Fromm 1961, viii), remains denied to individuals in modern societies. As a result of the fundamental human need for relationship and connection with others, the isolation accompanying individual freedom therefore generates anxiety and feelings of powerlessness, which prove unbearable and lead to the desire to escape the burden of freedom through new dependencies and submission (Fromm [21]). Fromm distinguishes three forms of possible reaction to isolation, anxiety, and powerlessness: authoritarianism, destructiveness, and conformity.

The authoritarian reaction consists in an attempt to replace lost primary bonds through symbiosis (Fromm 1961, 163). Symbiosis means the union of an individual self with another self or an external force, such that both lose their integrity and become completely dependent on one another. Only through symbiosis can security ultimately be regained and the unbearable feeling of powerlessness overcome, while the self loses its individuality and freedom.

Such a reaction defines the "authoritarian character": "He admires authority and tends to submit to it, but at the same time he wants to be an authority himself and have others submit to him" (Fromm 1961, 186). His focus on dominance or submission precludes solidarity. Individual differences are always interpreted as superiority or inferiority, but never as equality.

The second reaction pattern, destructiveness, does not aim at symbiosis with an object, but at its elimination. In doing so, the self-escapes the feeling of its own powerlessness in relation to the external world by destroying it or itself (Fromm [20], Fromm [21]). Most often, destructiveness remains unconscious and is rationalized in various ways: "There is virtually nothing that is not used as a rationalization for destructiveness. Love, duty, conscience, patriotism have been and are being used as disguises to destroy others or oneself" (Fromm 1961, 202).

According to Fromm, the most common response to the lack of social bonds in modern societies is conformity: "The individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be" (Fromm 1961, 208f). The associated loss of the self also eliminates the discrepancy between the self and the world, so that anxiety and feelings of powerlessness subside. The person, however, who gives up his individual self becomes an "automaton" (Fromm 1961, 209).

With the increasing dissolution of social bonds, growing isolation, and intensifying feelings of powerlessness in the wake of advancing capitalist development, factors that weaken the self-gain in importance, while factors that strengthen the self-lose significance, according to Fromm (Fromm 1961, 144). Above all, monopolistic capital, opaque political apparatuses, and constant media overload, according to Fromm, represent uncontrollable "gigantic forces" (Fromm 1961, 144) that rob the individual of their independence and significance (Fromm 1961, 153ff). At the same time, the reification of social relationships is also advancing: "The concrete relationship of one individual to another has lost its direct and human character and has assumed a spirit of manipulation and instrumentality" (Fromm 1961, 138). The resulting isolation, anxiety, and powerlessness are ultimately coped with through authoritarianism, destructiveness, and conformity. What, then, does this finding imply for neoliberal capitalism?

Neoliberal Subjects: Competition and Insecurity

Applying Fromm's theory of "escape from freedom," developed in the early 1960s, to the neoliberal context reveals a significant increase in material and discursive factors that undermine the self. Neoliberalism not only deepened the gap between growing wealth and increasing poverty; "governing through insecurity" (Lorey [22]) was and remains a political program. Above all, social cuts and the precariousness of employment conditions have increased the everyday insecurity of existence, which now extends into the middle of society. Inflation and rising unemployment have exacerbated the precariousness of living conditions in recent years while simultaneously driving social polarization and exclusion. The social cuts looming in the wake of military buildup will further increase insecurity, poverty, and inequality. Moreover, the ubiquity of the market ideology and discourses of freedom and choice, of competition and performance, accompany the general sense of insecurity and foster isolation.

Defined as competitive relationships, social bonds dissolve until the commonality among individuals consists primarily of the Hobbesian struggle of "everyone against everyone." Consequently, individuals are required to demonstrate competitiveness coupled with personal responsibility and entrepreneurial spirit (see Michalitsch [23]). Not only does personal responsibility relieve one of responsibility for others, but one's own marketability simultaneously requires the most optimal adaptation to market conditions and aggressiveness in the form of assertiveness. Criticism of social conditions and solidarity with others are virtually automatically excluded (Michalitsch [23]).

However, if the subject's market-oriented nature becomes a matter of survival, this, according to psychoanalyst Klaus Ottomeyer, systematically fosters "sadistic forms of one's own coping with fear and gratification" (Ottomeyer [24]). For the perception of others' greater performance triggers the impulse to eliminate them in order to improve one's own market prospects. The suffering and downfall of others thus promise an "optimized" market position and one's own strength. "Masculine" hardness advances as "indifference to pain" (Adorno 25) becomes a virtue. In the process, not only is the pain of others blocked out, but one's own pain is also repressed. Interpreted as a "sign of weakness," it is "something that must be hidden or optimized away. It is incompatible with performance" (Han [26]).

Among "performance subjects who are as insensitive to pain as possible and permanently happy" (Han [26]), pain becomes a blemish and a sign of failure, for which, in neoliberal times, the individual always bears the blame. Where everything becomes a matter of personal responsibility, a lack of empathy becomes the norm. As Byung-Chul Han makes clear, this is all the truer as the "palliative society"-dominated by the suppression of pain-

increasingly succumbs to a "mania for complacency" driven by social media: In the general pursuit of pleasure, nothing must cause pain. "It is forgotten that pain purifies. It has a cathartic effect" (Han [26]), which is lacking in neoliberal society with its negation of pain.

The neoliberalization of Western societies thus further strengthened self-weakening factors by promoting isolation, fear, and a sense of powerlessness both materially and discursively and by increasingly blocking the psychologically relieving expression of pain. The serious consequences of this development can be seen not least in the fact that in a Eurobarometer survey on emotional well-being in 2022-with four possible responses-50% of respondents cited uncertainty, just under 30% helplessness and anxiety, and a quarter frustration as their dominant emotional states (EP [27]). According to the EU Mental Health Report 2023, 46% of the approximately 26,700 respondents across all EU member states had experienced emotional or psychosocial problems in the twelve months prior to the survey; 52% of women and 39% of men acknowledged such issues (EC 2023: 50ff). When asked about the key prerequisites for mental health, 60% cited their living conditions and 53% cited financial security (EC 2023 [28]). It is in this context that threat scenarios and calls for war readiness take effect.

Effects: Militarization and Authoritarianism

Fromm already points out how the threat of war impairs the lives of individuals: "The threat of war has become a nightmare which, though it may not be conscious to many (…), has overshadowed their lives and increased their feeling of fright and individual powerlessness" (Fromm 1961, 152). The discourse on war readiness thus represents a significant source of stress for individuals, which undoubtedly intensifies the urge to escape freedom and gives rise to authoritarian, destructive, and conformity-oriented reaction patterns [29].

Identification with the army and even integration into a military apparatus promise relief in several respects. They allow the "authoritarian character" to merge into a larger whole; through clear hierarchies, they satisfy the need for authority, for they imply, on the one hand, submission to an authority and, on the other hand, confer authority of their own; in both cases, a sense of personal strength. Furthermore, the principle of obedience frees one from the burden of personal decision-making, and belonging to a corps offers, in addition, a potential point of connection for narcissistic pride [30-32].

The military, however, also gives rise to destructive patterns of behaviour; after all, the fundamental goal of military action is professionalized and systematic destruction. A sense of duty and patriotism represent common forms of rationalizing destructiveness, and a willingness to make sacrifices can also be interpreted as a rationalized tendency toward self-destruction.

The more warfare, military ideals, and enemy stereotypes are normalized, the more this also enables a pattern of conformity. As militarized cultural forms, symbols, and ways of thinking spread, this also leads to corresponding tendencies toward conformity. "We must become fit for war" was ultimately Pistorius' slogan. This "we" obviously refers to the "Volksgemeinschaft" (people's community) largely discredited by National Socialism and not only implicitly reintroduces it into the discourse but also reinforces the authoritarian pattern of dissolving into the greater whole. Moreover, the construction of an external enemy not only legitimizes militarization but also creates a homogeneous, culturally superior "we" and undifferentiated, backward, yet dangerous "others." It fosters unity, and the "we" of national community not only masks social inequality, widespread precariousness, and economic conflicts, but above all allows one to seemingly quite rightfully invoke one's own superiority. Through the creation of an enemy image, therefore, not only is patriotism emphatically demanded, but rather a sense of belonging to a community is constructed that offers an authoritarian "escape from freedom." Since military combat readiness-even as women are increasingly integrated into the military-is still primarily expected of men, this "we" simultaneously creates a special bond among men as "protectors of women and children." The accompanying gender hierarchy opens up yet another authoritarian variant of the "escape from freedom [33]."

The militarization of subjects therefore does not merely entail the increasing linking of individual identity with military principles and ideals-which includes support for the military, readiness for military service, and the endorsement of and orientation toward military "virtues" such as obedience, bravery, camaraderie, or honor; it also goes hand in hand with nationalism and patriarchy and reinforces the authoritarian dispositions of subjects, bringing forth the "authoritarian character": "the personality structure which is the human basis of Fascism" (Fromm 1961, 186) [34,35].

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

[1] All translations of original German quotations are by the author.

[2] The following media outlets were examined: FAZ, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Bild, Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, ARD Tagesschau (8 p.m.), ZDF Heute (7 p.m.), RTL Aktuell (6:45 p.m.). Study period: February 24 (the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine) through May 31, 2022.

[3] Currently, around 70 colleges and universities have implemented a civil clause, which accounts for 17% of all German colleges and universities.

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