

German defence minister praises Rommel, Hitler's "favourite general"

By Johannes Stern
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Last Saturday, speaking at the Field Marshal Rommel Barracks, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen announced that the Army would keep the name of the barracks. "The Rommel Barracks has been so named consciously on an anniversary of the resistance. And that shows that Rommel also had his role in the resistance," she told media representatives. It had therefore been decided not to rename the barracks.

Von der Leyen's announcement on the so-called Day of the German Armed Forces shows the true mindset that prevails at the top of the Defence Ministry. Following the uncovering of a neo-Nazi terrorist cell in the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) at the beginning of May, von der Leyen had been compelled to make some critical remarks about the all-too-obvious continuity of military traditions from Hitler's Wehrmacht to today's Bundeswehr. She was enthusiastically praised for this, especially by the Left Party.

From the beginning, the announcement by the minister of defence to rename some barracks and to remove Wehrmacht memorabilia was hypocrisy. It was a nod towards the anti-militarist sentiment in the population and merely served to downplay the extent of the right-wing conspiracy in the army. Now, von der Leyen has decided it is time to go on the offensive. Of all of Germany's war-time generals, she has chosen to line up behind the one who was carefully built up in the Third Reich through Goebbels's propaganda ministry to become Hitler's most famous "war hero".

Von der Leyen's claim that Rommel was part of the resistance to Hitler is absurd. Before Rommel clashed with Hitler over military matters at the end of the war, and was driven to commit suicide, he was considered Hitler's "favourite general". In October 1942, after a conversation with the Nazi leader, Goebbels wrote in his diary, "Rommel has made a very deep impression

on him [Hitler]. ... He has a firm world-view, is not only close to us national socialists [Nazis] but is a national socialist."

Among other things during his career, Rommel was commander of the Führer Headquarters, and played a central role in the Nazi war machine in five campaigns—Poland, France, Africa, Italy and the Atlantic Wall. To the very end, the Nazis clung to the "Rommel myth" they had themselves created. On October 18, 1944, Hitler's personal daily order for the state burial of the general in Ulm read: "In the present struggle for the fate of the German people, his name is the byword for outstanding bravery and fearless bravado."

What Hitler meant by this can be seen in Rommel's own orders. As commander of the brutal German occupation of Italy, against all the provisions of the Geneva Convention, he compelled more than a million disarmed Italian soldiers to work as "military internees" for the German war economy. Rommel's order of October 1, 1943, regarding this read: "This war is a total war. If the men of Italy no longer have the opportunity to fight for the freedom and honour of their fatherland, they have the duty to use their full labour power in this struggle."

Just a week before, on September 23, 1943, he had issued the instruction: "Any sentimental inhibitions on the part of German soldiers towards gangs loyal to [former Italian general] Badoglio in the uniform of former comrades-in-arms are completely inappropriate. Any of these who fight against German soldiers has lost any right to protection, and is to be treated with the harshness which belongs to scum that suddenly turns his weapons against his friend. This view must be made common knowledge among all German troops."

Von der Leyen's partisan defence of Rommel

confirms the warnings of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and the *World Socialist Web Site*. The return of German militarism and the systematic transformation of the Bundeswehr into a military task force, or rather a war force, defending the interests of German imperialism around the world requires the revival of the old Nazi traditions and their criminal methods.

In the meantime, this can be clearly seen in the official foreign policy publications of the German government. For example, a contribution in the anthology *Germany's new responsibility*, presented by the minister of defence at this year's Munich Security Conference, complains that in Germany, the "neurotic effort to remain morally clean" runs through almost all domestic and foreign policy debates.

In this it was clear: "Whoever goes to war, must, as a rule, take responsibility for the deaths of people. Including the deaths of uninvolved and innocent people." Especially, in "times of new strategic uncertainty," the role of the military should be "particularly emphasised [again], not only because society demands such hard tasks, but because it ultimately remains the most critical, and therefore also the most demanding, the crowning discipline of foreign policy."

The concluding prognosis by Jan Techau, the author of these lines, whose current book bears the notable title *Leadership Power Germany*, would also have met with enthusiastic support among the generals of the Wehrmacht: In the coming years, Germany "will have to do much more politically and militarily" and will "be confronted with foreign and security policy issues", of which "the country does not even dare to dream today. Maybe not even in its nightmares."

Von der Leyen's revival of the Rommel myth goes hand in hand with the preparation of new "nightmares". "Warm words are not enough," she declared at the Rommel Barracks. In view of growing international challenges, soldiers "will need more and more sustainable funding and support from society in the coming years." She boasted that after 25 years of cuts, the Army would finally be able to grow and recruit more staff. New materiel would also be procured for foreign assignments.

Speaking to the press, von der Leyen then gave free rein to her dreams of new German war and colonial policies. She expected the Bundeswehr to be in

Afghanistan for many years to come. "Even in Kosovo, the Bundeswehr has been stationed there for almost 20 years. In Afghanistan, we probably have to think in even longer periods," she said. "We should not keep asking when can we withdraw, because it motivates the terrorists and unsettles the people who want to stay at home." To stabilise Afghanistan needs "patience and a long breath".

The German ruling class is forging its war plans against increasing resistance in the population. On Thursday, an INSA survey for the *Bild* newspaper revealed that 55 percent of Germans are for the complete withdrawal of the Bundeswehr from Afghanistan. Only one in five respondents supported German soldiers remaining in the country.

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