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# Militarizing antimilitarism? Exploring the gendered representation of military service in German recruitment videos on social media

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the gendered representation of military service in the German *YouTube* series *Die Rekruten (DR) (The Recruits)*, a popular web series produced on behalf of the German armed forces (Bundeswehr) for recruitment purposes, which accompanies 12 navy recruits during their basic training. The article is situated within research on masculinity and the military, in particular military recruitment. It supplements current scholarship by studying a previously neglected case that is of particular interest given Germany's antimilitarist culture, which should make military recruitment and military public relations more difficult. The article asks how military service is represented in *DR*, what its discursive effects are, and what role (if any) masculinity plays in this process. We find support for recent feminist research on military masculinities (including in military recruitment) that emphasizes ambiguity and contradiction. What distinguishes the construction of military masculinity in *DR* from, for example, recruitment advertisements in the United States or the United Kingdom is its markedly civil character. This not only broadens the military's appeal for a more diverse audience but also increases the legitimacy of the military and its activities. It does so by concealing the violence that has for the past two decades also been a very real part of what the Bundeswehr does.

**KEYWORDS** Gender; military recruitment; militarization; military masculinity; hegemonic masculinity

## Introduction

This article analyzes the gendered representation of military service in the German *YouTube* series *Die Rekruten (DR) (The Recruits)*, which, according to its advertising agency creators, is “probably [the] first *YouTube* reality

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documentary in advertising history" (Castenow GmbH 2018). The article is situated within a larger body of research that examines the multiple links between masculinity and the military, in particular military recruitment. Feminist research has highlighted the crucial role that understandings of manliness play in the justification of armed forces and the violence committed on behalf of the state (see, for example, Åhäll 2012; Belkin 2012; Enloe 2000, 2016; Goldstein 2001; Hooper 2001; Hutchings 2008; Wibben 2018). A narrower strand of research has zoomed in on the role of masculinity in military recruitment and public relations (see, for example, Brown 2012; Enloe 2015; Jester 2021; Shim and Stengel 2017; Strand 2021).

This article contributes to the aforementioned bodies of research by examining the previously understudied German case. More specifically, it analyzes how military service is represented in *DR*, a reality-documentary web series produced on behalf of the German armed forces (Bundeswehr) for recruitment purposes. The series, which accompanies 12 navy recruits through their basic training, is highly successful. According to the Bundeswehr, the series has had more than 40 million views and spawned ten successor series (see Castenow GmbH 2018); *The Guardian* described it as "one of Germany's most successful social media projects ever" (Connolly 2017).<sup>1</sup> Building on existing research on gender, visibility, and military recruitment (see, for example, Jester 2021; MacKenzie 2020), our analysis focuses primarily on the role of masculinity in making military service attractive. The article asks how military service is (audio-visually) represented in *DR*, what its discursive effects are, and what role (if any) masculinity plays in this process.

Although *DR* presents military service as a gendered story of self-improvement through (militarized) masculinization, the construction of military masculinities is more complicated, mainly in two respects. First, similar to more recent recruitment advertisements for the British and Swedish armed forces, the representation of military masculinities in *DR* is not uniform but ambiguous and contradictory. This increases the appeal of military service for more diverse audiences who might be primarily motivated not by a sense of patriotic duty but by other factors, such as self-fulfillment or increased employability in the civilian job market (Jester 2021; Strand and Berndtsson 2015). Second, what distinguishes the construction of military masculinity in *DR* from other cases is that even the (contingent and context-dependent) hegemonic form of military masculinities within the series (embodied by the instructors) is remarkably civil. This is mainly due to Germany's antimilitarist culture, an "extraordinary reluctance to become actively involved in international military security affairs" (Berger 1998, 1) that evolved after the Second World War. This culture also manifests in the distinctly "'civil' military culture" and leadership philosophy within the Bundeswehr (Leonhard 2019, 307).

Widespread antimilitarism should, in theory, provide an additional obstacle for military recruitment, in particular at a time when the use of military

violence has become part of the Bundeswehr's "operational reality" (Struck 2004, 8601). That is also a notable reason why the German public remains skeptical of military operations abroad (Mader 2017). Against this background, we argue, the distinctly civil representation of the German soldier and of military service more generally in *DR*<sup>2</sup> (1) renders military service more attractive to an antimilitarist audience, (2) contributes to militarization through the spread of militaristic values (if in a toned-down form) (Enloe 2016, 18), and (3) conceals the violence committed on behalf of the German state. Ironically, the incorporation of antimilitarist values is also what makes it possible for the Bundeswehr to use social media for recruitment purposes without risking a backlash.<sup>3</sup> Thus, *DR* does, in a way, militarize antimilitarism.<sup>4</sup>

The article begins with a discussion of the existing literature on gender and military recruitment. It then contextualizes *DR* within Germany's antimilitarist culture, the country's increasing participation in military operations abroad, and ongoing processes of force transformation that, in 2011, resulted in the creation of an all-volunteer force (AVF). The article then outlines the research design, followed by the results of the empirical analysis. In the concluding section, the main findings are summarized, and their implications for current and future research discussed.

### **Gender and military recruitment: beyond the "warrior hero" representation of military service**

In recent years, scholars of critical military studies have increasingly focused on military public relations and recruitment as a central site for the production and reproduction of the legitimacy of military forces and violence (Basham 2013; Crilley 2016; Strand and Berndtsson 2015). Feminist scholars have examined the important role that notions of masculinity play in both making military service attractive and legitimating the state and its armed forces (Belkin and Carver 2012; Brown 2012; Enloe 2015; Jester 2021; Strand 2021). Military service (in particular in combat) is often seen as the epitome of masculinity and the soldier as the ideal citizen (Belkin 2012; Cockburn 2010; Enloe 2016; Peterson 2010). It is widely acknowledged that masculinities are discursively produced, contingent, highly context dependent, and not necessarily uniform or coherent (Connell 2005). However, early studies on military masculinity in particular often focused on "conventional martial masculinity" (Brown 2012, 5), which foregrounds characteristics such as "toughness, violence, aggression, courage, control, and domination" (Eichler 2014, 82). This is reflected in displays of "macho heroism" in military recruitment advertisements (Andén-Papadopoulos 2009, 25) that often "advertise" and "celebrate" violence (Belkin and Carver 2012, 559).

However, recent research has problematized understanding (hegemonic) military masculinity as a "singular form of gendered practice" (Henry 2017, 187).

Empirical studies have identified alternative forms of military masculinity, such as the “helpful hero” (Wegner 2021), the “liberal warrior” (Welland 2015a), the “humanitarian soldier-scholar” (Khalili 2011, 1475), or a specific “peacekeeper masculinity” (Duncanson 2015, 237). Each form stresses different characteristics, such as communication skills or competencies in conflict prevention. These studies highlight that military masculinities are, in fact, contingent, context specific, ambiguous, and contradictory (see, for example, Belkin 2012; Duncanson 2015; Henry 2017). Furthermore, they raise doubts as to whether the “warrior hero” (Woodward 2000) still is, or indeed ever was, the hegemonic form of military masculinity (see Furneaux 2016; Niva 1998). Although some scholars rightly criticize the concept of (hegemonic) military masculinity itself (Chisholm and Tidy 2017; Howell 2018; Kirby and Henry 2012; Zalewski 2017), we concur with Duncanson (2015), who considers abandoning the concept altogether as premature. In our opinion, masculinities, and particularly those associated with the military as opposed to civilian masculinities (see Millar 2019), are indispensable in making sense of how military service is rendered attractive and how armed forces and their activities are legitimized. Moreover, in our view, it is possible to distinguish between hegemonic and subordinate forms of masculinities within a specific context, and the gendered positioning of subjects is crucial in making the military attractive. Thus, we argue in favor of contingent, localized forms of hegemonic military masculinity.

As in research on military masculinities more generally, studies of military marketing and recruitment have also recently turned their attention to complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction (Brown 2012; Jester 2021; Strand 2021; Strand and Berndtsson 2015; Strand and Kehl 2019). This is due, at least in part, to the AVF’s need to broaden their recruitment pool, leading to more diverse and ambiguous recruitment messaging. Scholars have, for example, examined differences between branches of the United States military and the function of ambiguous and contradictory messaging, such as messaging that is less aggressive, more risk averse, and more diverse (Brown 2012; Strand 2021; Strand and Berndtsson 2015; Strand and Kehl 2019). Others have explored humor in the camouflaging of militarism and the delegitimation of criticism (Beck and Spencer 2021). These studies have shown how more complicated articulations of military masculinity, while in contradiction to the stereotypical warrior hero, increase the military’s appeal for a broader audience and also risk hiding the violence committed on behalf of the state, such as by associating it with fitness or with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights (Strand 2021; Strand and Kehl 2019).

This article complements existing research through an analysis of Germany as a previously understudied case that is particularly interesting for several reasons. First, the majority of studies on military recruitment so far have focused on the Anglosphere and, more recently, Sweden (Beck and Spencer 2021; Brown 2012; Jester 2021; Strand 2021; Strand and Berndtsson 2015;

Strand and Kehl 2019). Empirically, this exploration of a new case adds to our understanding of gender and military recruitment. Second, Germany's antimilitarist culture leads us to expect military recruitment to face more skepticism than in more militarized societies, in which a military presence is much more common not just on television but also in schools, on campuses, and at sports events, and in which soldiers are usually celebrated as heroes (Enloe 2010; Wibben 2018). Third, this German case is of particular interest because of *DR's* unique format as a self-described reality documentary, a hybrid that, while a narrative form, positions itself as non-fictional. Indeed, despite the series' declared recruitment purpose, the Bundeswehr stresses that the recruits are "all real" and that there are "no actors" (Sewerin 2016, citing the official description of *DR's* original *YouTube* channel). Unlike traditional advertising videos that viewers can relatively easily identify as fictional and staged, *DR's* documentary aesthetics and explicit claim of authenticity hide "the gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith" (Bleiker 2001, 510). All of this, we argue, makes *DR* not only a significantly more powerful recruitment tool than traditional advertisements but also a much more forceful intervention in German public discourse on the Bundeswehr. Put simply, the hybridity of *DR's* form itself contributes to the series' discursive effect.

### **German antimilitarism, the AVF, and military recruitment**

The most important point when discussing German military policy is Germany's antimilitarist culture. The Bundeswehr was established in 1955 as a conventional deterrent in the face of the Warsaw Pact. At this point, the impetus to avoid any potential repeat of the German past found its expression in an explicit break with the militarism of the German Empire and Nazi Germany. In 1954, the first German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer declared "German militarism ... dead" and denied the army the "central position that it held in the old form of society and government" before 1945 (Adenauer 1954). After 1945, the Federal Republic of Germany had to develop a new strategic culture, core elements of which were the Bundeswehr's tight integration into Western security institutions (most notably the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)), constitutional restrictions on the use of the armed forces, the democratization of civil-military relations, and the development of a new military culture. The Bundeswehr's new leadership philosophy of "inner leadership" (*Innere Führung*) was designed as an antidote against militarism and the abuse of the armed forces for aggressive and/or anti-democratic ends. At its core is the ideal of the "citizen in uniform" (*Staatsbürger in Uniform*) who is above all beholden to democratic values and the rule of law and who fights (only) in their defense (Hoffmann and Longhurst 1999; Leonhard 2019).

Since 1990, Germany has increased its participation in military operations outside the NATO area (so-called “out-of-area operations”). In fact, peace operations, nation building, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and training missions have become the Bundeswehr’s de facto bread and butter. The continuous process of force transformation to adapt the Bundeswehr to its changed tasks, culminating in the suspension of conscription in 2011, has only intensified pre-existing difficulties in recruiting and retaining military personnel (Apt 2011). The general public has remained skeptical of out-of-area operations. A clear (if potentially declining) majority of the population has an ambivalent or negative attitude toward military operations (Mader 2017; Rotmann, Bressan, and Brockmeier 2020; Steinbrecher et al. 2021). That the Bundeswehr’s current operational reality consists mainly of the sorts of missions that the public disapproves of (in particular combat operations) should in theory present an obstacle to both military recruitment and the processes of militarization; this fact makes the German case somewhat unique.

## Research design

The empirical argument of the article is based on an interpretive discourse analysis of the web series and its official website, which provides supplementary information, including individual profiles of the recruits and instructors (Bundeswehr Karriere n.d.). The series consists of 62 regular episodes, each between three and a half and 13 minutes long. There are, in addition, three home stories, in which a camera crew accompanies selected recruits home, and five “reunion” episodes, in which a camera crew visits select recruits three months after basic training (Bundeswehr n.d.a).

The web-series format – which we understand here as an internet-based, narrative, serial, and usually fictional audio-visual form (Kuhn 2017) – poses methodological challenges for researchers. These challenges are most notably due to such series usually having many episodes, but also due to their multimodality. Taking an interpretive approach entails not only a specific focus on meaning making but also a flexible research design that allows for shifts in that focus and is tailored to the characteristics of the material to be analyzed (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Heeding recent calls to extend the study of images in international relations (Bleiker 2015), the article follows a heuristic framework to reflect on the multimodal character of the web series (van Munster and Sylvester 2016). This involves formulating a set of questions that is attentive to the overall research purpose (the representation of soldiers and military service) but also mindful of the characteristics of the research data (the particular format of the web series).

On a very general level, we approach the material with a broad analytical sensitivity toward what is and is not shown, and how (Foster 1988). However, we pay particular attention to how representations of the German soldier and



military service evolve from the interplay between what is and is not said or seen and the aesthetic and stylistic composition of the series, including music, intonation, camera perspective, and cuts (see also van Munster and Sylvester 2016). Our analysis is informed by a poststructuralist understanding of gender as a relational category (Butler 1990). As a consequence, we are particularly interested in how meaning is produced through the arrangement of different discursive elements (signifiers, subjects, objects, practices, and so on), both in a narrow linguistic sense and with respect to (audio-)visual construction (MacKenzie 2020). For example, how are different subjects (the soldier, the civilian, the recruit, the instructor, and the drop-out) positioned in relation to each other? How are certain subjects and/or practices constructed as masculine or feminine by being linked in a specific way to other discursive elements, such as characteristics like strength or weakness? For example, during an interview in *DR*, one of the instructors explains that recruits who drop out during the first two weeks usually give the same reasons for their decision: “away from mommy [*von Mutti weg*], little sleep, too stressful and ‘That’s not what I expected’” (Bundeswehr 2016f, 2:45–3:45). Understood in this way, the decision to quit is primarily the result of a lack of determination and/or stamina or a romanticized idea of military service that does not survive a reality check. Put simply, the drop-outs lack masculine characteristics like toughness, maturity, and rationality.

It is important to note that the gendered positioning of subjects happens through stylistic choices as much as through dialogue. For instance, the hierarchy of recruits (as civilians) and instructors (as “finished” soldiers) is stylistically reproduced by instructors at times being filmed from below, especially during muster, which makes them appear larger than life, more powerful and strong (see Bundeswehr 2016f, 2016h, for examples of this). Another means is the use of music to reinforce feminization or masculinization. This includes, for instance, the musical accompaniment of scenes on the obstacle course with heavy metal (Bundeswehr 2016q, 2:37–2:55),<sup>5</sup> and of the swearing-in ceremony with marching drums (Bundeswehr 2016x, 1:41–1:58), and the sad violin music that mocks the disappointment of a recruit who finds out that she has to take out her piercings (Bundeswehr 2016a, 4:34–4:42).

At the same time, it is equally crucial to pay attention to the overall story arc, which is why we also draw on insights from (visual) narrative analysis (Freistein and Gadinger 2020), albeit to a limited extent. This is one important way in which *DR* departs from traditional recruitment videos and provides greater space for storytelling. The larger story of *DR* as the coming of age of the recruits through military training becomes visible not in individual episodes but only through an analysis of the overall narrative that unfolds across them.

Importantly, *DR*’s hybrid documentary–web-series format requires attention to the politics of that format. Because traditional recruitment video clips are designed as advertisements, viewers can easily decode them as

fictional (Williamson 1978). By contrast, *DR*'s documentary aesthetics make it more difficult to distinguish from independent journalism. Contrary to docudramas (Heck 2017), *DR* does not feature reenactments using actors. Its documentary-style depiction of daily routine is combined with interviews with instructors and recruits. Colorful text and images superimposed over the footage provide further information. The overall aesthetics of the series (seemingly) provide a glimpse behind the scenes, (allegedly) enabling viewers to see how military life "really" is – the producers' declared aim.

At the same time, the series is also not a clear-cut documentary. An important element of *DR*, atypical of documentaries, are sequences in which individual recruits (at least apparently) film themselves and address viewers directly for feedback. This is analogous to the highly popular genre of video blogs on *YouTube*. *DR* thus makes use of aesthetic codes and conventions that are more familiar and therefore more appealing to the mostly younger consumers of new digital media. *DR* further deviates from the documentary genre in that the neutral reporting format is subverted by humorous editing, such as fading in elements drawn by hand or including cartoonish noises to comment on statements by recruits. This mixed format makes *DR* entertaining enough to keep audiences engaged but at the same time underlines the message's authenticity and credibility (on the production of authenticity, see Banet-Weiser 2012).

### **The making of a German soldier: the production of soldier subjects in *DR***

In the following section, we explore how military service and soldier subjects are produced in *DR*. We begin with a brief discussion of (the representation of) military training as a gendered process of self-improvement. We address ambivalences, contradictions, and the specifically German restrained form of military masculinity further below. Given space constraints, the discussion is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

#### ***Personal growth through militarization: toughening up and pushing limits***

In the most general sense, *DR* tells a coming-of-age story. The process of transforming civilians into soldiers through military training is presented as a process of self-improvement during which the recruits face and learn to overcome various challenges. On the one hand, this is not at all noteworthy. Not only does this echo recruitment messaging in other countries such as Sweden (Strand and Berndtsson 2015), but it is also exactly what can be expected in a reality documentary focused on people getting used to a new job – namely, that new tasks will be a challenge at first, but things

that they subsequently learn to master. On the other hand, the armed forces are not just any employer, and being a soldier is not just any job, because of the constitutive role that violence plays in military service (Basham 2013). Representing the making of soldiers as primarily about self-improvement, even if seemingly banal, warrants attention because of its political consequences for the justification of violence committed on behalf of the state.

Moreover, the making of soldiers in *DR* is deeply gendered. We pick three aspects here to illustrate how soldier subjects are constructed in a way that makes military service attractive. First, the narrative arc of the series tells how (former) civilians face challenges, learn to overcome them, and emerge on the other side as a better (militarized) version of themselves. This is clearly visible over the entire season in which insecure, overwhelmed, disorganized, and/or undisciplined civilians are made, through military training, into competent, disciplined, capable, and organized soldiers. This progress is most clearly visible in the last regular episode, in which the recruits look back on their first days and reflect on their own progress. The interviews are intercut with flashbacks (in black and white) showing the recruits on their first days, making clear how far they have come (Bundeswehr 2017e). Thus, *DR* offers a representation of military service as primarily about self-improvement and pushing one's own limits – a representation that should, following Strand and Berndtsson's (2015) argument, appeal to subjects for whom patriotic duty might not be as strong a motivator as for past generations.

Second, military training is primarily a process by which recruits adopt masculine attributes in pursuit of the ideal of the “emotionally constrained, physically fit combat soldier” (Chisholm and Tidy 2017, 101). For example, instructors regularly propagate stamina and toughness as ideals, such as by stressing that the Bundeswehr is not a place where “giving up” is an option (Bundeswehr 2016d, 4:19–4:20)<sup>6</sup> and reprimanding recruits for “complaining” and “moaning” too much (Bundeswehr 2016k, 1:10–1:12, 2017d, 1:56–1:59). Another obvious example of this process is discipline, which is evident in the course of muster and formal service, during which certain postures must be maintained. The comments of the instructors are illustrative here: “There’s no twitching, no shaking, no grinning, no coughing, no nothing” and “You don’t fiddle around with your face, I’ve said that before already” (Bundeswehr 2016c, 3:05–3:13).

Likewise, control is omnipresent, both of instructors over recruits and of recruits over their everyday lives, from the cleanliness of the ship to making their beds and keeping their lockers in order.<sup>7</sup> Deviations are reprimanded bluntly – for instance: “When I look at Barrack-Room 23, yeah – I’ve never seen such a rotten [*räudig*] urinal before. ... The platoon commander almost puked” (Bundeswehr 2016l, 4:09–5:11). Similarly, viewers can see how the recruits themselves adopt militaristic values, such as when they express displeasure at their own inability to march in lockstep or about

equipment being lost (see, for example, Bundeswehr 2016t, 5:20–5:42, 2016u, 2:45–2:53) or when one recruit says during outfitting that she is “into camouflage” because that “somehow radiates respect” (Bundeswehr 2016b, 1:20–1:26).

An important element is physical fitness (Crane-Seeber 2016; Higate 2000; McSorley 2016; Strand 2021). Becoming a soldier is presented primarily as a physical process. The emphasis and relative enhancement of masculine attributes are most evident in the context of physical training. A number of episodes are dedicated to various aspects of military fitness: the basic fitness test (Bundeswehr 2016g), marches (Bundeswehr 2016h, 2016k, 2016n), the so-called “22 Push-Up Challenge” (Bundeswehr 2016m), swimming (Bundeswehr 2016p), and general military fitness (Bundeswehr 2016q, 2016r). Especially in this context, masculine characteristics are presented as desirable, such as when recruits call for “More!” with every push-up or sit-up or sing songs about not being able to feel any pain while running (Bundeswehr 2016r, 3:49–4:00, 2016t, 4:53–5:20, 2017d, 1:16–1:19).

Third, and closely linked to the previous point, the gendered story of progress and self-improvement is supported through the hierarchical ordering of different masculinities and femininities, most notably the relative positioning of instructors, recruits, and drop-outs as well as (implicitly) soldiers and civilians. In *DR*, the instructors embody the (local) hegemonic notion of masculinity. By contrast, at the beginning of basic training, the recruits fall short of this ideal type of German soldier in numerous respects, such as with regard to formal service (marching, greetings, and so on), discipline, cleanliness, order, and, most notably, fitness. It is in the context of physical training that the differences between recruits and instructors become most pronounced. In part, this is because the series explicitly exaggerates them in a humorous way by showing recruits’ and instructors’ actions in immediate succession, thus maximizing the contrast between the two groups. For example, in an episode in which recruits have to pass a basic fitness test, one instructor claims that over the past couple of years, the requirements have been lowered. He then adds, with a smirk, that anyone who does not manage to pass “really doesn’t belong here,” which is followed by a cut to a recruit who worries that the test “could become tough” (Bundeswehr 2016g, 0:56–1:03). Similarly, in an episode about a five-kilometer march, one recruit is shown complaining about pain, heat, thirst, exhaustion, and a lack of motivation. This is immediately followed by a clip of an instructor on the same march who, smiling and without any signs of physical effort, declares that he is “in a good mood” (Bundeswehr 2016k, 2:16–2:28). Similar examples can be found in other episodes, most notably those on military fitness (Bundeswehr 2016q). In general, physical effort and exhaustion can only be seen in recruits, while instructors do not even seem to start sweating (Bundeswehr 2016t, 4:53–5:20). In sum, *DR* clearly positions the soldier

(symbolized by the instructors) above the civilian (the recruits), albeit without directly claiming (or maybe even intending) to do so. At the same time, by showing the recruits' progress and transformation into soldiers, the series makes clear that becoming a soldier is not beyond reach.

To be sure, the fact that there is a hierarchy between recruits and instructors is not, in and of itself, surprising and would be similar in a documentary about any other profession. Nevertheless, the positioning of recruits and instructors has consequences for how viewers perceive the distinction between them, and that between (masculine) soldiers and (feminine) civilians more generally. Unlike the recruits whose military training has not yet been completed, the instructors have already become "real" soldiers; this is the reason for their superiority. If masculinity is produced by military training, this automatically implies that civilians are also to be regarded as less masculine.

### ***No Rambo types: the "citizen in uniform," antimilitarism, and the absence of violence***

It is important not to lose track of the important ways in which the production of military masculinities in *DR* departs from the ideal-typical martial notion of warrior masculinity on display in action movies and at least some recruitment advertisements (most recently, see Jester 2021). Two points are relevant here: there is a range of contradictions and ambiguities that often characterize "real-life" military masculinities, and there is a German-specific, civil form of military masculinity that departs from the ideal-typical soldier as a warrior hero.

First, *DR* provides an additional example of the complicated, contingent, and contradictory nature of military masculinities highlighted in recent research, both in the military itself (Henry 2017) and in recruitment material (Jester 2021; Strand 2021; Strand and Berndtsson 2015; Strand and Kehl 2019). This can be seen clearly in one of the most popular figures of the web series, Jerome Demelius, who challenges the ideal-typical image of the soldier, embodied by the instructors, as emotionally constrained and disciplined.<sup>8</sup> This is already visible in Demelius' appearance and demeanor at the beginning of the series. With tunnels in his earlobes, tattoos, and a relatively strong affinity for jokes and banter, he does not correspond to conventional notions of military masculinity.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he consciously breaks with traditional notions of masculinity more generally.

The first, particularly striking, example of this is Demelius' repeated display of the "OOTD," or "Outfit of the Day," which involves him presenting various uniforms in the style of a fashion blogger (see, for example, Bundeswehr 2016e, 2:43–3:30). These segments are modeled after fashion video blogs, in which users present fashionable combinations or give make-up tips (see

Rocamora 2011). Although the wearing of uniforms is represented as positive here and shown as a fashionable style decision, in reality, individual soldiers' choice of clothing is severely limited (cf. BMVg 2015; Bundeswehr 2015).

The second example of these seemingly counter-hegemonic articulations is visible in a scene in which a recruit complains about fellow soldiers taking his equipment. Demelius then gives him a hug (requesting that the editors "fade in sweet music") and comments on this by saying that soldiers must "sometimes also comfort [each other] in a comradely way" (Bundeswehr 2016s, 4:43–4:57). Even though Demelius' embrace of his comrade is somewhat self-deprecating, it expresses compassion. Motivated by the need to alleviate another's suffering, compassion is closely linked to an "ethics of care," which, as Welland (2015b) argues, is traditionally coded as feminine. The scene thus presents an instance of a "hybrid masculinity" (Eisen and Yamashita 2017, 803) that incorporates feminine-coded characteristics and calls into question what is traditionally understood to be a (male) soldier (see also Furneaux 2016; Niva 1998).

There are other examples of the (partly humorous) challenging of hierarchies, gender roles, and the Bundeswehr as an institution. These include recruits who, in various situations, such as when they muster, fool around (Bundeswehr 2016f, 3:10–3:11, 2016l, 0:31–0:38), whine (Bundeswehr 2016k, 2:16–2:26), or, in the absence of superiors, question the meaning and purpose of certain orders (Bundeswehr 2016c, 3:52–3:55, 2016j, 2:26–2:44, 2016u). These scenes also demonstrate how the style and aesthetics of the series can reinforce the meanings in its content. For instance, in one scene, a recruit makes a face, apparently mocking military discipline. At that moment, the image is frozen and colored in red. This is combined with a buzzer sound that usually accompanies a wrong answer in a quiz show, humorously indicating that military norms have been breached (Bundeswehr 2016l, 0:37).

These instances complicate the naturalness and self-evidence of conventional notions of military masculinity as emotionally subdued and disciplined (embodied by the instructors). Such alternative articulations of masculinity can, in principle, contribute to disrupting and breaking up hegemonic militarized masculinities (Butler 2004). However, in *DR*, this banter proves to be a double-edged sword; the humorous critique of militarized masculinity produces an image of military service as a challenging but also "fun" occupation, thus essentially normalizing militarism and concealing violence (Beck and Spencer 2021; Dinnen 2016). Indeed, scenes like Demelius' OOTD presentations suggest that there is room for heterogeneity and diversity in the Bundeswehr. That is, soldiering does not require a complete adoption of hegemonic notions of militarized masculinity. The way in which the series is filmed and produced – in the style of a documentary combined with scenes in which the recruits film themselves, apparently without external

influences – and the fact that banter is shown at all create the impression that the Bundeswehr allows the recruits a certain amount of freedom.

Above all, *DR* suggests that military service does not require recruits to give up their individuality. In principle, this makes military service in the Bundeswehr more attractive to today's potential recruits who, as some studies have argued (Strand and Berndtsson 2015), are more concerned with self-realization and employability than with civic duty and proving their manliness in combat. The fact that the recruits are able to fool around or even criticize superiors and the Bundeswehr as an institution makes them appear authentic, and, as a result, they become credible advocates for the Bundeswehr. Similarly, the inclusion of bloopers contributes to creating a more unvarnished, direct, and human image of the Bundeswehr (see, for example, Bundeswehr 2016m, 6:27–6:49). Because of its content and aesthetics, *DR* appears authentic, honest, and less controlled and/or commercial, which clearly distinguishes it from traditional recruitment advertisements and adds to the power of its message.<sup>10</sup>

Second, it is important to acknowledge the context specificity of the local version of hegemonic masculinity displayed in *DR* and what this means for the series' credibility for a German antimilitarist audience. Notably absent from *DR* are familiar themes such as aggression and common motivations to join the armed forces, such as the protection of the innocent, risk taking, and adventure seeking (see, for example, Elshain 1982; Jester 2021). Indeed, while values such as discipline and physical strength naturally also play an important role in (*DR*'s representation of) the Bundeswehr, what is most remarkable is that even the hegemonic version of military masculinity in *DR* is best described as reluctant. This is evident in a number of aspects, such as the relative absence of instructors yelling at or running down recruits (Bundeswehr 2016i, 3:44–4:04).<sup>11</sup> It is most apparent in the context of the handling of weapons, which are commonly seen as markers of conventional martial masculinity (Jester 2021).

On the one hand, weapons training plays a major role in training, and recruits stress that they enjoy this part of military training (Bundeswehr 2017b, 3:40–3:42, 2017c, 5:05–5:14, 8:50–8:58). In addition, technical details such as components and weight are displayed for the weapons (and only for the weapons), similar to a first-person shooter computer game in which players select their weapons (Bundeswehr 2017c, 3:01, 2017d, 6:24). On the other hand, the topic of weapons is primarily dealt with by rhetorical distancing. To begin with, instructors' speech during weapons training is marked by an emotionally distanced, technically neutral language. For example, instead of talking about "shooting" (people), instructors use the term "bending" (the finger) or refer to the weapons as "our tools of the trade" (Bundeswehr 2017a, 2:40–2:41). As a number of scholars have pointed out (Cohn 1990; Thomas 2011), technically neutral language obscures the violence associated with

weapons and war and thus contributes to making military training more acceptable.

Moreover, not only are references to killing as proof of masculinity entirely absent (although not uncommon in other contexts – see Eisenhart 1975), but both recruits and instructors also talk about weapons primarily by stressing the responsibility that comes with their handling. For instance, during an interview, one recruit (next to a superimposed text explaining that he is “aware of his responsibility”) states that

in the final analysis, we have to be able to handle it [the weapon] in case something happens. Of course, we all hope that it never comes to us having to use this weapon ... in exactly the way for which it is intended. (Bundeswehr 2016o, 0:40–0:44)

This statement, which even avoids any direct reference to the reason for which weapons are made, clearly shows a quite remarkable amount of reluctance toward a central element of military service.

In a similar vein, other recruits explicitly stress the need to “assume responsibility” for “the weapon and everything we do with it” (Bundeswehr 2017a, 2:57–3:04) or, quite significantly given that *DR* features prospective soldiers, otherwise express uneasiness at its purpose (Bundeswehr 2017a, 1:22–1:28). During another interview, an instructor points out that the aim of the training is to teach recruits that a weapon “can mean life” or death (*über Leben entscheiden kann*) and that, as a consequence, the handling of weapons must never be “thoughtless” (*leichtfertig*) (Bundeswehr 2016o, 1:05–1:13).<sup>12</sup> In a different interview on post-traumatic stress disorder, the same instructor states that being a soldier means that “one often has to ... be busy [*hantieren*] with weapons” and one might find oneself in a situation in which “one has to – unfortunately – after all aim at other people,” all of which results in “feelings ... that one tries to forget very, very quickly” (Bundeswehr 2016m, 2:33–2:42). Overall, recruits and instructors alike stress responsibility above all. They display reluctance to even touch upon the fact that weapons are designed to kill (not just to aim at people) and, more generally, that (the possibility of) violence is at the very heart of military service (Basham 2013).

The specifics of the German case also come to the fore in an episode during which instructors and recruits visit the Sachsenhausen concentration camp as part of their political education – an integral part of German military training regardless of rank (Werdelis 2008). On the way to the site, the recruits are interviewed on their thoughts regarding the visit. A number of recruits speak about the necessity of learning about the Holocaust so that history does not repeat itself. As one recruit puts it, concentration camps are a reminder of “what the Bundeswehr, war, et cetera, leadership means, or can mean, what can happen ... when [the] wrong people get into power” (Bundeswehr



2016w, 1:00–1:13). On site, other recruits express feelings of “the necessary respect” that a concentration camp demands (Bundeswehr 2016w, 2:54–2:56). After the guided tour, the recruits describe the experience as “shocking,” “alarming,” and “uncomfortable” (Bundeswehr 2016w, 4:08–5:40). Importantly, a number of recruits express their hope that “such a thing does not happen again” (Bundeswehr 2016w, 4:08–4:52). The visit itself is marked by a sober atmosphere, underlined by the recruits wearing their dress uniform instead of battle dress, the explicit instruction to “drop the military” conduct [*das Militärische*] while on site (Bundeswehr 2016w, 2:10–2:12), and the solemn string instruments playing in the background of the scenes. This episode in particular demonstrates how the representation of military service in *DR* departs from ideal-typical forms of warrior masculinity.

Both examples – the weapons training and the concentration camp visit – illustrate an exceptional reluctance that is only understandable in the context of established German antimilitarist practices that regulate what can legitimately be said and done. Put simply, an emphasis on conventional martial masculinity would likely fail to resonate with large portions of the recruitment pool. Moreover, aside from strategic considerations, the fact that instructors and recruits are themselves a part of society should not be underestimated here. Indeed, given that German decision makers still avoid talking about war and killing, even though this is an apt description of at least part of what the Bundeswehr did in Afghanistan (Shim and Stengel 2017), German soldiers’ ambivalent attitude toward weapons and killing is hardly surprising. Furthermore, as noted above, German antimilitarism goes hand in hand with the specifically German ideal of the soldier as a citizen in uniform who is (only) willing to take up arms because they are fighting for the values of Germany’s liberal democratic order. This ideal continues to shape the hegemonic ideas of masculinity in the Bundeswehr. At the same time, these expressions of reluctance ensure the compatibility of the armed forces and of soldiering as a profession with widespread antimilitarism.

### **Conclusion: militarism with the handbrake applied**

This article has examined the ambiguous production of military masculinities in the web series *DR*. We have found that the representation of military service is complicated, ambiguous, and in part contradictory. On the one hand, the series represents military training as a gendered process that makes insecure, undisciplined, and somewhat unserious civilians into confident, competent, disciplined, and organized soldiers. Military training is primarily characterized by the internalization of masculine-coded characteristics and militaristic values. Through this hierarchical positioning of subjects (recruits and instructors, civilians and soldiers), military service is made attractive.

On the other hand, the construction of military service is ambiguous and contradictory, in two respects. First, *DR* is an example of recent trends, across different national contexts, to present a more ambiguous picture of the soldier that departs significantly from traditional warrior hero representations of military masculinity, making military service more attractive to a broader, more diverse audience. Second, and more importantly, what is remarkable is *DR*'s distinctly civil form of military masculinity that reflects the antimilitarist culture in wider German society, such as when recruits and instructors alike express an aversion to violence. To be sure, from a military sociology perspective, this is entirely unremarkable. The Bundeswehr's civil military culture was deliberately installed to guard against any potential detachment of the military from German society and its liberal democratic values – with the larger aim of preventing the Bundeswehr ever becoming a hotbed of militarism (Bald 2002; Leonhard 2019).

Within the context of *DR*, however, the representation of Germany's civil military culture appears to have the opposite effect, facilitating militarization rather than reining it in.<sup>13</sup> The toned-down, civil form of military masculinities on display in *DR* and the representation of antimilitarist culture expressed by soldiers decrease the risk that recruitment attempts fall on deaf ears or even provoke a backlash. They do so by avoiding a clash with German society's deeply ingrained antimilitarist culture. With respect to the study of militarization, the analysis presented here clearly shows the need to question essentialist understandings of, in this case, militarism and antimilitarism and the analytical benefit of a poststructuralist approach. What the German case illustrates is that, rather than merely having a constraining effect, antimilitarism can be mobilized for the purpose of militarization; that is, the “domestication,” via social media, “of the military as an organisation and therefore ... the spread of militarism in society” (Shepherd 2017, 350; see also Stengel 2020 for further discussion).

Empirically, our analysis highlights social media as an important site where dynamics of militarization play out (Crilly 2016) and where, with respect to Germany more specifically, (a contingent local form of) antimilitarist culture is reproduced, challenged, and transformed. Determining if and to what extent *DR* contributes to a potential erosion of antimilitarist norms in German society would require an analysis of audience reception. However, the series does seem to have paved the way for more openly militaristic representations of the Bundeswehr. Thus, some of *DR*'s successor series have a distinctly less civil feel to them and are focused on topics much closer to conventional martial masculinity, including out-of-area operations (*Mali*), paratrooper and special forces training (*Die Springer, KSK*), and a commando course (*Survival*) (Bundeswehr n.d.b). Further research should study these successor series from a comparative perspective to trace any potential shifts and explore how these formats and other activities of the Bundeswehr contribute to a continuous rearticulation of the German antimilitarist discourse on social media.

## Notes

1. The further web series, following in the footsteps of *DR*, portray everyday life during military operations in Mali (*Mali*); soldiers on a four-day bivouac in the snow (*Biwak*); paratrooper training (*Die Springer*); German soldiers participating in the Invictus Games, a sports event for wounded, injured, and sick armed service personnel and veterans (*Unbesiegt*); civilian training with German special forces (*KSK*); officers on the commando course (*Survival*); female recruits undertaking basic training in the air force (*Die Rekrutinnen*); life on a frigate (*Besatzung Bravo*); the fight against coronavirus (*Einsatz gegen Corona*); and, most recently, the NATO mission to protect its “Eastern flank” (*Die Mission*).
2. Although the correct English term for members of the navy is “sailor,” members of the German Navy are commonly referred to as “navy soldiers” (*Marinesoldaten*).
3. This is not to say that *DR* was not subject to criticism. Indeed, it triggered a debate in Germany about the extent to which it is morally acceptable to advertise for military service (see Hanfeld 2016). However, criticism fell way short of universal condemnation, and the popularity of the series (and that of its successors) suggests that it was at least partially successful.
4. The idea that *DR* is “militarizing antimilitarism” was suggested by an anonymous reviewer. We gratefully appropriate it here.
5. The music also ends promptly when the first recruit fails at the wooden wall. On masculinity and heavy metal, see Walser (1993).
6. The original German quote is “Aufgeben könnt ihr bei der Post.”
7. Compare, for example, Bundeswehr (2016j and 2016l).
8. It is worth noting that in other situations (such as during interviews) the instructors also on occasion break with this norm. See, for example, Bundeswehr (2016m, 6:27–6:49).
9. What the ideal soldier looks like can be seen from the military regulations regarding the appearance of soldiers, in which tattoos, ear tunnels, and other obtrusive fashion decisions or body modifications are regulated in detail as exceptions from the norm (BMVg 2015; Bundeswehr 2015). In general, a discreet and modest professional appearance is emphasized.
10. However, it should be noted that the alleged closeness to reality is discussed controversially both in the comments and among soldiers themselves. See, for example, the online comments on Bundeswehr (2016v). We thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out critical discussions among the troops.
11. In one scene, an instructor is seen supporting a recruit who has fallen behind on a march and appears to be hyperventilating. In the next scene, he is shown walking next to the recruit while she describes her difficulties during the march.
12. Note that the instructor does not say “life and death,” only “life.”
13. It should be noted, though, that a systematic analysis of effects would require a reception analysis because the audience is not just a passive recipient. Moreover, it is unclear to what extent social media influences the wider societal discourse.

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