

“We Are No freaks, for Heaven’s Sake”...

Combat Soldiers and their Experiences of Violence in Post-Heroic German Society

By Maren Tomforde

The first time I met a German soldier who had killed a person fighting on the side of the enemy during combat in Afghanistan was in 2009. This officer told me about his experiences of violence, his emotions right after the combat, and what he thought about his deployment to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) after he had returned to Germany. It was this very emotional and intense conversation that ultimately sparked my interest as a humanist in further investigating the question as to the perception and interpretation of experiences of violence by Bundeswehr soldiers. Due to the seriously deteriorating security situation even in northern Afghanistan, from 2009 onwards the Bundeswehr soldiers were no longer mere passive victims of violence during attacks but were also confronted with the challenge of actively participating in combat and having to kill, if necessary.

The use of military force as part of ISAF operations was essentially new, not only to the society and the armed forces in Germany, but also and particularly to the individual soldiers concerned. While soldiers had been training for decades to use force as part of their profession and their service in the Bundeswehr, Afghanistan marked the first occasion in which they actually faced active combat since the end of World War II. This active use of force during the Afghanistan mission represents a “*constitutive breach*” (Langer, 2013, p.71) resulting from the value discrepancy between a so-called “*post-heroic German society*” (Münkler, 2007) and the armed forces in robust deployment.

This study¹ focuses on the question as to how the soldiers deal with the violence they inflict. Only little attention has been paid as yet by researchers to the perspective of the active agents of violence, compared to that of its victims. In most cases, soldiers with combat experience combine both perspectives and are therefore faced with a double burden. How do they deal with combat situations and how do they give meaning to them? How does the experience of violence change the soldiers’ self-perception? Are combat soldiers transforming into dull fighters and warriors without any values and norms?²

¹ This article is based on a variety of data. On the one hand, it is derived from knowledge gained in the course of the last decade in the framework of this writer’s anthropological research about the Bundeswehr missions in the Balkans and in Afghanistan (see : Tomforde 2010, 2013, 2015*b*, and 2016). The findings discussed here are also drawn from 30 half-structured in-depth interviews with soldiers returning from Afghanistan as well as from numerous focus group interviews and discussions on experiences of violence in Afghanistan. For an extended analysis of the author’s research data on combat experiences of Bundeswehr soldiers in Afghanistan, see : Tomforde, 2015*a*. For privacy reasons, all interviews cited in the course of this article were made anonymous.

² Many other important issues also arise which unfortunately cannot be broached here due to the limited scope of this article. For example, the role of women in combat situations, the indirectly perceived use of violence (Schut & van Baarle, forthcoming) or questions about the individual and social legitimization of the use of force would also be fascinating topics.

Killing is still one of the most hidden phenomena of modern wars, because many cultural and social scientists hesitate to discuss and investigate the act of killing. This article endeavours to overcome this psychological barrier. It will first look at how combat situations and acts of killing are being perceived, interpreted and endowed with meaning by soldiers in-theatre and how these experiences influence their self-perception.³ Secondly, it will probe how German society, with its prevailing peace ethics and clear rejection of military violence, reintegrates homecoming soldiers with combat experience. In other words, its objective is *not* to examine the problems, let alone the traumatization, of soldiers coming home from Afghanistan. Rather, the ‘voices of the soldiers’ shall be heard to shed some light on three questions: what symbolic importance is attributed to experiences of violence (including acts of killing) in the military context, what internal effects these experiences have on the armed forces and what external effects they have on German society.

In order to closely examine the soldiers’ points of view and their joint construction of the meaning of violence experienced and inflicted by them, this article is structured as follows: the connection between violence and culture shall first be discussed because violence – like social behaviour in general – is learned, passed on and interpreted within a specific cultural context. In the present case, the focus will be on the interpretation of violence in the context of the Bundeswehr culture as well as the violence-averse⁴ culture of German society. After discussing the anthropological perspective on violence, the data set and the framework of this research project will be explained. This will be followed by an analysis of the empirical data which will be used to probe the multiple dimensions and perceptions of combat, killing and dying from the soldiers’ “-emic” point of view. This includes a discussion of the special role that comradeship can play. Especially when it comes to dangerous situations, comradeship can display characteristics of family ties and thus help soldiers to cope with extreme experiences. In this context, the peculiar soldierly humour which makes soldiers laugh even in the middle of combat will be interpreted as an integral part of the mechanisms of coping and interpretation. The article will conclude with a discussion of the multiple facets of the soldiers’ homecoming which can be characterized by difficulties of reintegration, trauma and a psychologically-loaded discourse on the part of the society accepting the soldiers back into the fold. Furthermore, topics such as the sense and legitimacy of a mission, recognition from society, mourning and remembrance but also the interpretation of the existential experience of violence and the soldierly self-perception after having returned home are of notable importance as well.

Violence and Culture

Violence is a very complex phenomenon; its causes cannot be explained clearly or easily. Many different factors can play a role both in the emergence and in the interpretation of violence. Due to the complexity of this phenomenon as well as its dependence

³ Ajimer & Abbink 2000; Weiss & Six-Hohenbalken, 2011, p.4.

⁴ While most members of our society fundamentally oppose the use of violence, we are every day confronted with the “*performative quality of violence as spectators*” (Schröder & Schmidt, 2001, pp.5-6) and we expose ourselves to the omnipresence of depictions of violence in the media which often illustrate our “*unspoken fascination by violence, this irritating lust for excess*” (Langer, forthcoming, p.7).

on sociocultural contexts, no single theory of violence can explain *all* of its aspects. Thus, the emergence of violence is discussed in different ways by a variety of scientific explanatory approaches.⁵ When examining specific acts of violence, the interaction of individual and sociocultural factors always has to be taken into consideration.

As a basic assumption, violence is often regarded as a moral evil which should be avoided and for which clear rules have been established in all societies worldwide. Under specific circumstances, however, the use of violence may be necessary, justifiable and thus even regarded as something positive. As a complex phenomenon, violence is always also influenced by culture ; it first takes place in our minds, where it gains its significance (Schröder & Schmidt, 2001). In order to obtain a differentiated and holistic perspective on violence, different forms of this ambivalent phenomenon must be examined and compared with each other. In this article, the use of violence and its interpretation by the Bundeswehr soldiers in Afghanistan will be analyzed from an internal point of view. The focus will thus be placed on the perceptions and processing of experiences of violence by military personnel. Because the emphasis lies on the "*targeted direct physical injury of others*" (Nunner-Winkler, 2004, p.26) during military operations, a minimalistic interpretation of violence as a sheer *force* which can be used to inflict injury or death will be employed.

Anthropological field research in violent settings makes it possible to focus on the cognitive aspects, on statements and narrations about experiences of violence, and thus enables the researcher to develop an ontological understanding of it.⁶ It is a challenging proposition not to classify violence *per se* as something evil (or something good) but, in defiance of the moral challenge, to examine how people can inflict it upon others and how they evaluate the significance of such an act. Violence is being *redefined* by all those involved, in order to understand and give meaning to it. Not only the victims of an act of violence, but also the agents who inflict pain or even end someone's life are equipped with cultural assessment criteria for their behaviour (Demir, 2013, pp.9-10).

German soldiers are socialized as citizens within a society which basically rejects violence. At the same time, they are also socialized into a military subculture which expects them to use violence if necessary in their capacity as representatives of the State, adhering to clearly defined rules. This raises the question of which cultural criteria they apply to assess their actions on a mission. Apart from the sometimes conflicting socialization as German citizens and as members of the armed forces, however, there are other factors which influence the perception, interpretation and evaluation of experiences of violence during operations abroad. The situational framework, for example, also influences the way in which an act of violence is assessed. When the first soldiers were killed in 2002 and 2003 in Afghanistan,⁷ soldiers seem to have had more difficulties in

⁵ See for instance : Galtung, 1975 ; Riches, 1986 ; Keegan, 1995 ; Collins, 2011 ; Gudehus & Christ, 2013.

⁶ Cf. Ajimer & Abbink, 2000 ; Weiss & Six-Hohenbalken, 2011, p.3 ; Collins, 2011.

⁷ Eight service members in 2002 were killed in action in Afghanistan, and in 2003 another seven suffered the same fate. See: [http://www.bundeswehr.de/portal/a/bwde/lut/p/c4/DcJBDkAwEAXQs7hAZ2_nFtg0o0b7o_mkRROnJ-JLD_qg6gXDMqWUaaAfmluaas53WJSol5KX08L0OxAbwWklZvRhVQOYvdvQw3JuKnlbHLuQ_cB0U_KLg!/,](http://www.bundeswehr.de/portal/a/bwde/lut/p/c4/DcJBDkAwEAXQs7hAZ2_nFtg0o0b7o_mkRROnJ-JLD_qg6gXDMqWUaaAfmluaas53WJSol5KX08L0OxAbwWklZvRhVQOYvdvQw3JuKnlbHLuQ_cB0U_KLg!/) last accessed on 1st December 2014.

emotionally coping with these impressions in the context of an operation perceived as a peacekeeping and stabilization mission than with the combat experiences from 2008 onwards. In those years, Bundeswehr soldiers in the north of the country were already more and more frequently exposed to attacks and combat situations which soon became the rule rather than the exception.⁸ Against the backdrop of deteriorating frame conditions after 2008, the operational use of violence was not only legally legitimized but the soldiers gradually also began to accept it in sociocultural terms. Because it has not been directly confronted with the dangers of the country of deployment, German society at home has been unable to take this step.

The perception and interpretation of violence which illustrate characteristics of an interpretative ambiguity depends on the perspective of those involved in the so-called triangle of violence (formed by agents, victims, and observers or witnesses: Riches, 1986).⁹ The following section will endeavour to determine how Bundeswehr soldiers interpret the use of violence in Afghanistan based this writer’s own research findings.

The Combat Situation: Multiple Dimensions

Some will come to miss those days and hours, in spite of all the burden. They will never again feel as alive as they did during those hours after having successfully mastered a combat situation and in that first night back in the camp, drinking ‘to good friends’. Maybe they will never again experience comradeship in such a high intensity. From the point of view of those soldiers for whom an army’s purpose is ‘to battle’, the days in Kunduz may have been the last in which they were able to practice their profession according to their understanding [Captain W., 2013, p.59].

It is of the essence to take a look at the multiple dimensions of combat,¹⁰ from the omnipresent fear, the actual combat experience, the desire to kill and the ‘yearning’ for the combat medal to the conceptualization of the enemy. At the beginning of the interviews, the soldiers presented themselves and described their types of deployment. Without being asked, most of the soldiers very accurately named the number of combat situations and IED¹¹ attacks they were confronted with during their deployments.

Being asked whether they also name the precise number of firefights and attacks when talking to each other, or whether they talk about these combat experiences at all, most of the soldiers stated that they hardly ever mentioned these experiences in everyday

⁸ See for example : Sedlatzeck-Müller, 2012.

⁹ David Riches (1947-2011) was one of the leading British representatives of the ethnology of violence. In his *Anthropology of Violence* (1986), he opened the research on violence to anthropologists as well.

¹⁰ Combat is generally understood as a brief armed confrontation between hostile forces. During the mission in Afghanistan, the term combat was sometimes interpreted more widely when it came to awarding the combat medal, because this medal is also awarded for having suffered terrorist or military violence under very high personal danger (source : Bundeswehr). For example, passengers of a vehicle that drove over an IED and was damaged in the process would also earn the “combat” service medal (interview with Captain 26, Afg. 2012).

¹¹ IED stands for Improvised Explosive Devices. This expression refers to booby traps which are relatively easy to build and not too expensive. Retreats of insurgents or anti-government forces are secured by such booby traps. With such devices, it is also easy to force the enemy into an ambush.

conversations. *Insiders* would know from the mention of the contingent, the location of deployment and the range of tasks what the other had done and seen on the operation without having to talk about it *in detail*. This means soldiers with combat experience do not have to talk about it because the 'general data' of their deployment already include this information. The comrades know who among them participated in which combat episode and who experienced precarious situations. However, having combat experience does not imply that these soldiers are automatically more respected among their comrades. The soldiers distinguish precisely between active participation in a combat situation and an IED attack which officially is also classified as a combat situation. What is more, professionalism in battle and the way the consequences of combat are dealt with are also evaluated. Word about weaknesses or conspicuous behaviour spreads quickly among soldiers, and (in most cases) the comrades discuss this kind of behaviour and even sanction it in case of an emergency. So fortunately, in northern Afghanistan soldiers were not confronted with the phenomenon of "*escapism in times of war*", described by Harald Welzer (2005, p.199), which takes advantage of the opportunities to act with "*unpunished inhumanity*" that arise during a war. Instead, soldiers seem to deal with combat experiences in a differentiated manner. They look very carefully to ascertain the 'quality' of a certain combat situation and to see how each of the soldiers was involved and how they have been dealing with it afterwards.

The first few interviews for this study about experiences of violence during the mission in Afghanistan were conducted in 2009; however, a first round of group discussions about deteriorating security conditions and their impact on military personnel had already been conducted as of 2007. At first, the soldiers were at a loss for words when it came to describing their experience of violence. They chose such phrases as "the enemy was wiped out", "crushed", "sent to Nirvana", but not "killed" (see also de Libero, 2014 ; Apelt, 2009). Only since 2010 have soldiers started to talk openly and directly about killing – at first, this even led to shock and confusion among soldiers without operational experience. The 'Good Friday fighting' in Isa Khel, south of Kunduz, that took place in April 2010 and left three Bundeswehr soldiers dead and eight wounded marks a turning point in this respect. What started in September 2009 with the bombing of the two tank trucks in Kunduz now became obvious for everybody in the Good Friday fighting and could no longer be denied: in Afghanistan, the Bundeswehr actively participates in combat and also kills people. The following paragraphs will outline the most important dimensions of these combat experiences based on the 'voices of the soldiers'.

Fear, the 'Baptism of Fire' and a Special Form of Comradeship

In published interviews (Koelbl, 2011) as well as during this author's own conversations with soldiers, fear has been a frequently mentioned topic. However, fear is not experienced as a hampering phenomenon that engulfs everything else, but rather as a side effect that soldiers have to deal with.¹² Their soldierly self-perception as professional

¹² Sociologist Randall Collins (2011, p.106) mentions a continuum between fear and tension as well as between competence and incompetence which can take effect during combat.

soldiers who can be deployed internationally requires them to deal with fear in this conscious manner. When I was in ‘Camp Warehouse’ (on the ISAF military base) in Kabul in 2004, a missile was fired on the German part of this international camp. I was surprised that after the attack and after leaving the protective shelter, the soldiers neither talked about the attack as such nor about their fear of injury and death, although one of their comrades had been wounded. Upon enquiry, I was told repeatedly that the risk of an attack was indeed omnipresent. However, people would not talk about the fear of attacks to avoid giving it too much weight. Everyone was afraid somehow anyway, so they did not also need to talk about it. According to the soldiers, it was part of the coping strategy to let the fear of injury and death stand back and to keep it at a distance. The soldiers were aware that in the preliminary training before a mission they could only partly prepare for the confrontation with combat, injury and death. In most cases, reality turned out different from a practice scenario. Especially the superior officers would not so much fear for their own lives but for the lives of their subordinates:

In combat and being afraid to die? Bringing the other guys home safe and sound and living up to the responsibility as a leader is more important than the fear for your own survival.¹³

Not only are soldiers consciously dealing with fear, but there is also hardly any time and place for it in a combat situation:

Sometimes people ask me if I had been afraid to get injured or to die. In that particular situation, I definitely wasn’t afraid. But that’s not because I felt like Superman, it was because I just didn’t have any time to be afraid” (Captain S. & Trenzinger, 2013, pp.31-32).

At the beginning of an operation, the fear of combat situations, of injury and death is especially great. Only after having survived the first attack or the first combat situation unscathed, the fear of the unknown and of possible failure gives way to a professional way of dealing with dangerous situations (Collins, 2011, pp.107-108). Subsequently, fear is an omnipresent but not a paralyzing phenomenon during a military operation. Sometimes, the soldiers’ fear of losing a comrade seems to be greater than the fear of getting injured themselves. This once again illustrates the significance of comradeship during a mission (King, 2013). It is often described as the most precious asset or as a kind of social security (Focken, 2013, p.74 ; Koelbl, 2011). Jonathan Shay also emphasizes the great significance of these small combat teams based on experiences from the Vietnam War:

As civilians, we cannot comprehend a soldier’s pain from his point of view. Battle inspires a passion to care for each other among the comrades in arms that can only be compared to the earliest and closest family ties” (Shay, 1998, p.78).

Some Vietnam veterans even believed already to be dead “*in cases where a close friend had fallen*” (*ibid.*, p. 92). These quasi-familiar ties during a military operation go so deep that the fear of dangers fades into the background against the need to protect and support one’s comrades. When deployed far from home and one’s own social environment,

¹³ Interview with Major n°18, deployed to Afghanistan in 2011.

comrades are the most important reference and an emotionally highly charged social primary group. Thanks to them, challenging situations can be endured, overcome and dealt with together. In most cases, this important connection between the comrades ceases after leaving the combat area or the location of deployment. In a 'non-violent setting', these unifying conditions are no longer present and individualistic values regain importance (Gray, quoted in Arendt, 1970, p.67).

After an attack, the *debriefing* is essential. But we must not just concentrate on the 'victims', the shooters. The superiors/ leaders who had to bear the responsibility also have to receive special attention. (...) It's especially difficult for a superior officer to bear responsibility in dangerous situations and then to make the right decisions. (...) When you've survived a fight or an attack together, the differences between the ranks are disappearing. Every single one of the comrades plays an important role. Being able to rely on each other 100%, that is true comradeship.¹⁴

Apart from the central statements about the value of comradeship, the above-mentioned quote displays an interesting military perspective: in the *debriefing* after a fight, the shooters are defined as victims in need of special attention. Although fighting is part of the military's main business, the soldiers are apparently aware of the fact that the actual use of weapons must not take place without discussion and personal assistance afterwards. Soldiers who have killed another person are more likely than others to come home traumatized (Zimmermann, 2013). Images of combat situations can always come back up, as well as questions about the sense and legitimacy of killing in particular and of the whole operation in general. After a fight, soldiers do not always know if they have killed someone or not. Not knowing can lead to the same irritating feelings of guilt and shame as when one is sure to have shot somebody. However,

...most of the soldiers handle the experience of violence well. As they say, 'We are soldiers'. However, it depends on the superiors, whether they talk a lot to the soldiers after a fight and take care of dissociation.¹⁵

IEDs and Professionalism

Apart from the fear – often pointed out but not perceived as paralyzing –, roadside explosive devices were another recurring topic in interviews. Every soldier who spent time outside the camps in Northern Afghanistan during the last years was somehow confronted with IEDs. One soldier even told me that, as company commander at the end of a deployment, he had the honour – as if it was part of a farewell ritual – of defusing the last booby trap they had detected. As demanded by the omnipresent soldiers' humour, immediately after the deactivation a second IED detonated – the soldiers had not told their commander anything about this second booby trap and thus gave him quite a shock. The following statement also illustrates the stress-reducing effect of this very peculiar soldiers' humour. Moreover, it shows us the cruel face of war:

¹⁴ Interview with First Lieutenant n°10, deployed to Afghanistan in 2009.

¹⁵ Interview with Dr. Zimmermann, head of the Psychotrauma Centre at the Bundeswehr Hospital in Berlin, June 10, 2011.

Last year, on September 5th, we were blown up by a suicide bomber. An Afghan car with a license plate from Cologne was approaching my convoy, and I remember our driver saying : “Hey, look, that guy is from Cologne”. But the car didn’t stop – and all of a sudden fifty kilos of explosives detonated under our dingo. We were blown from the street and rolled down the slope; I had burns on my hand, my face, my elbow, my leg and several stones had left injuries on the back of my head. My gunner had splinters in his face because the screen of the automatic weapon on board had imploded ; my other comrades were injured, too. That’s the moment when you have to take a really deep breath and think : what have I learned back home ? So we got our comrades out of the vehicle, and as the platoon leader I took over the coordination of the local forces. I knew, we had two options : we could just sit down at the side of the road and cry or we could try to compensate the whole thing and to make a joke of it. I chose the second option, and that was the right thing to do. You make a few little jokes, maybe saying to one of your comrades : “Be careful, or you’ll set the grass on fire”.¹⁶

Until 2009, as a general rule, all Bundeswehr posts in Afghanistan used to be manned, even if the soldiers did not always have the required qualifications. Ever since the fighting increased in Kunduz, greater attention was paid to manning vacant posts with the right personnel and, if necessary, posts were even left vacant in some cases. Instead, soldiers who already had acquired combat experience were assigned to offensive actions against enemy forces – “*one step towards more professionalism and away from the mere manning of posts which could eventually cost lives*” (interview with Captain n°15, deployed to Afghanistan in 2009).¹⁷ Actually, the best-trained soldiers with the highest ranks are not always the ones who prove themselves during an operation. Interviewees repeatedly pointed out that some soldiers’ true capabilities would only become apparent in challenging situations : “*In times of war, the ‘grey, plain’ soldier proves his worth and demonstrates his qualities. Some enlisted soldiers excel on a mission. That is really impressive*” (interview with Captain n°25, deployed to Afghanistan in 2010).

During the mission in Afghanistan, if not before, the German Armed Forces and especially the deployed soldiers definitely left the ‘practice space’ of the Cold War behind them. It was replaced by a wide range of different experiences in the operational theatres, including real combat experiences. Due to the confrontation with combat, the Bundeswehr has been forced to start a process of ‘battlefield professionalization’, so to speak : to (at least temporarily) abandon traditional thought patterns and think out of the box. Boundaries between the individual rank categories have been weakened and qualifications have been given higher priority. As to what extent these experiences and new action patterns in the long run may contribute to the development of a postmodern Bundeswehr culture beyond the ISAF mission remains to be seen (Tomforde, 2015b ; Hajjar, 2014).

¹⁶ Sergeant Förster in Koelbl, 2011, no page reference.

¹⁷ A recent discussion of the importance of professionalization for the armed forces can be found in King, 2013.

Sounds of Combat and the (In)Direct Confrontation with the Combat Situation

Before the first combat situation, the inner tension among the soldiers is usually great, and questions and doubts about one's qualification can arise. When the fire starts, most soldiers only realize after a moment that these strange sounds are actually combat sounds. The more combat experience the soldiers get, the better are they able to differentiate between individual sounds and relate them to the corresponding types of weapons (Clair, 2012).

At first I didn't figure out what those sounds were ; I even asked my driver if there was a problem with the engine. At some point I realized – we were under fire. My pulse started racing and I called out: step on the gas! But then I quickly pulled myself together : why should we run away ? I know what we can do, what we've learned together. So we turned around to show them what we were capable of ! Later, in other combat situations, I automatically acted like that.¹⁸

At first, we didn't realize what was going on. We heard some kind of whistling noises, then we saw bullet holes in the dingo. It was reassuring, though, to talk to someone I knew in the operations centre in Kunduz in that situation. After the fight, the *insurgents* cleared out. Some of them just lay there and didn't move. They were about 400-500 meters away. It was too dangerous to follow the *insurgents* and to examine the bodies. There were no casualties on the German side. It was very disappointing that after the fight, the superior officers were interested neither in the situation nor in how the comrades felt. My car had been hit three times ; I never noticed that during the fight. In a combat situation, you run certain automatisms that you've learned in training, like changing your magazine.¹⁹

Apparently, time is perceived differently during combat. Soldiers act almost automatically, except in cases when they shift into a state of shock. Automated procedures are applied that have been practiced many times in training. The adrenaline produced by the body leads to increased alertness and resilience. When the fire dies down and the fight is over, the body has to switch back to 'normal mode'. In a situation like this, all that built-up stress might break free as unstoppable laughing or as a great exhaustion or as 'party mood'. “*When I was sitting in the dingo,*²⁰ *the physical and mental tension eased gradually. I really noticed how the engine of my body was slowly going down and unconsciously switched from battle mode to normal mode*” (Müller, 2013, p.142).

Whenever possible, a so-called *debriefing* is usually conducted after a combat episode. Apart from tactical and operational aspects, personal feelings are also addressed – the direct superior has a special responsibility with regard to his subordinates in this respect. Not only does he have to ensure during a fight that his soldiers are being led through the combat situation successfully, he also has to bear in mind his soldiers' mental well-being after the fight. During the interviews, it became very obvious that the superiors take this responsibility seriously and that it sometimes weighs heavily on them:

¹⁸ Staff Sergeant Mudra, in Koelbl 2011 : no page reference.

¹⁹ Interview with Major n°20, deployed to Afghanistan in 2010.

²⁰ Name of a Bundeswehr armoured infantry vehicle.

After we had run into this ambush with no way out and I had no idea what to do, how to move forward or back, and I also had no idea how to get my men out safe and sound, I just wanted to quit and give up everything. Even afterwards, for several weeks I had been thinking about flying home. I felt as if I had failed my men, even though everybody reassured me that this wasn't the case. That still haunts me.²¹

Even for soldiers who have supporting functions in the camp and therefore have 'only' limited contact with combat activities, times of combat are life-changing experiences, too. They experience that time period so intensely that in most cases years after the actual event the dates and even the exact time of certain incidents are still present (Captain S. & Trenzinger 2013, p.20). An interviewee commented on this phenomenon saying that surely every one of us would also remember where he or she had been on September 11, 2001, at the time of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the US. Other soldiers with experiences of violence, however, “*are missing whole days, strangely enough*” (Langer, 2013, p.74). Such an extreme experience of violence apparently leads to a different perception of time and an emotionally charged form of remembrance which can either repeat every detail of an event even years later, or on the contrary may 'erase' entire days from memory.

Apart from direct experiences of violence, military personnel can also be exposed to indirect forms of violence during an operation. Most of the soldiers who usually fulfil their duties within the camp 'only' experience violence indirectly through first- or second-hand stories about attacks and combat situations. Narrations of violence have a potentially unsettling power. The soldiers in Afghanistan who mainly remained within the camp were nevertheless confronted with injured or even killed comrades again and again. This can (at least in part) be just as intense and challenging as a direct combat experience.

Then there was an IED attack on an ambulance vehicle once again. Soon we heard that one comrade was KIA (*killed in action*, MT). We have code names for all comrades so that we don't have to transmit their real names. And then the encoded message reached the operations centre saying that it was an officer. I was uneasy, restless, knowing that this had a different quality. Then the name was confirmed by the doctor. It was a good friend of mine. I was really shocked. My pulse was high, my heart racing and nonetheless I was super busy with organizational stuff in the operations centre. I was just functioning like a machine, knowing that I had just lost a good friend. But then one of the direct subordinates of the fallen comrade came up to me, trembling. At that point I had to get out of the operations centre. For the first time in my life, my batteries were empty. I couldn't go on, I needed 5-6 minutes to recover. After that, I went back to work. I went back into the operations centre because I didn't want to let my comrades down, but every 30 minutes I stepped outside. (The interviewee shows me the goose bumps he still gets when telling this story, due to the intensity of the experience).²²

²¹ Interview with Captain n°30, deployed to Afghanistan in 2010.

²² Interview with Captain n°23, deployed to Afghanistan in 2010.

After a pause, the interviewed captain continues his account of that day:

Then the chaplain came into the operations centre, hugged me and cried with me. That was both human and manly behaviour. It helped a lot that he showed this kind of empathy. I was an absolute wreck and so was the commander. After that, things went on in a professional manner, we focused on our work. After 5 or 6 hours I called my girlfriend. I only said : "*It's been a bad day, but I'll tell you about it tomorrow*". She noticed that something was wrong but she didn't ask for details. Over the next two days we wrote reports and organized the vigil. For two days, we comrades kept the wake in front of the ATV, taking turns every hour. You are standing there – silently, at attention – that helps. You sign up voluntarily for the vigil ; the lists were full in no time. Eventually, we accompanied our fallen comrade from the ATV to the helicopter for the transport back home and said our goodbyes. These days were characterized by professionalism and the certainty of the last journey. All in all, I can say that it was a difficult experience, but now I know that I'm able to function in extreme situations and I also know when I have to take a break. Today I live more consciously, I'm more susceptible to foolish actions, to having fun, I'm more relaxed, calmer and on the whole I'm acting with more confidence. I am grateful that I was privileged to have this experience with the contingent. We supported each other. Whenever we now meet for a celebration, the first toast is always proposed to honour M. (the fallen soldier, MT). Apart from that, we don't talk about it.²³

Apparently, the ability to mourn openly, to feel and to give in to the pain of suffering, does not weaken the soldiers but is part of the important and by now acknowledged process of grief work. In her introduction to the new edition of the Greek tragedy *The Bacchae*, American philosopher Martha Nussbaum states : "*The dignity of these humans is to weep*" (cited in Williams, 1990, p.xl). Due to the experience of violence in Afghanistan, German soldiers who were directly confronted with violent actions as well as those who have indirectly witnessed violence have developed a 'culture of mourning'. By now, it is legitimate to mourn, to cry, to weep and to commemorate openly. Saying farewell together has been positively assessed, on the official level of the Bundeswehr as organization as well as on the unofficial level of the soldiers (de Libero, 2014 ; Zimmermann, 2014). Apart from the new official memorial site 'Forest of Remembrance' (opened in November 2014 near Potsdam), there are many unofficial rounds and places of remembrance, maintained by the individual units or deployed soldiers in Germany. Due to this 'culture of joint mourning', the deployed soldiers no longer merely form a community of experience, more and more they are also transforming into an important community of remembrance (Leonhard, 2010). The members of such a community commemorate the fallen and the wounded together and in a variety of different ways, mostly unnoticed by the German public and far from the official Bundeswehr Memorial at the Ministry of Defence in Berlin. Soldiers also come together to remember moments when comrades escaped an attack only by a whisker. Thus the often quoted "ISAF generation"²⁴ first of all seems to be

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See also Tomforde, 2009 and 2015b ; Brinkmann & Hoppe, 2010 ; Seiffert, 2013.

a community of remembrance. These collective, typecast structures of knowledge and behaviour which have developed in the Bundeswehr due to the multiple operational experiences are now used for the purpose of collective processes of interpretation in (un)known scenarios and have become an important part of the soldierly identity. These interpretative patterns have long ceased to be valid only in the country of deployment. Because of the number and intensity of the ISAF experiences in particular, their impact also unfolds within the Bundeswehr in Germany. They have already become part of the “*collective memory*” (Assmann, 1995, p.57) of the German military. Not all individual Bundeswehr members need to have the knowledge that forms part of this collective memory, because its contents circulate publicly in the form of ‘modern storage media’ such as texts, narrations, images, movies, memoirs, even tattoos, etc., and can thus be remembered, kept available and passed on in lasting fashion.

It is very important to underline that existing differences between soldiers with and without combat/operational experience as well as those between mission country and home station are levelled when remembering the dead, the wounded, and moments of attacks. The term generation can therefore be rightfully applied as a category of remembrance “*which can be used to take a look at the after-effects and the reconstruction of past events*” (Leonhard, 2010, p.327). Against the backdrop of an almost non-existent public discussion of the various forms of human costs the German ISAF mission entailed, the soldiers opt for informal fora and ways of expression to remember the victims of an operation and thus, in spite of all existing differences, form a community, influenced by the experience of violence, which commemorates the dead in their own unofficial manner (de Libero, 2014 ; Martinsen, 2013, p.21)

Combat and Emotions: Yearning for Combat and Taking Pleasure in Killing?

In Afghanistan, soldiers sometimes experienced extreme situations which could only partly be shared with the families at home and which are difficult to understand in a mostly peaceful environment in Germany. During the interviews that have been conducted since 2009 with soldiers who had experienced violence in the course of their deployment, they always told, in a very emotional manner and *in detail*, about direct as well as the indirect experiences of violence. Many soldiers showed physical reactions during the interviews: goose bumps, shaking hands, headaches, abrupt nervousness and a sudden loss of appetite. The emotions that they had experienced in a much higher intensity during the actual events in Afghanistan were now surfacing again during the conversations. After his interviews with soldiers who had fought in Vietnam, Jonathan Shay already stated that American veterans with frontline experience described fighting with attributes like “*being in raptures*”, “*an ecstasy of combat*” that is “*better than sex*” (Shay, 1998, p.138 ; Bourke, 1999 ; Clausewitz, 1980, p.72). As a reaction to the danger during combat, the adrenal glands release adrenaline and other hormones into the body which can offer a biological reason for these feelings of elation:

I never felt as good as I did after a fight. I suppose that’s because of the release of endorphins. You’re just happy that you’re still alive and that you’ve made it

through. A combat situation is a highly intensive experience that I sometimes miss here in Germany. Experiencing a combat situation can lead to very different reactions, in my case to positive ones. But I have been looking for extreme experiences my whole life.²⁵

It is important, however, to point out that this “*fascination of aggressive ecstasy*” (Moeller, 1992, p.88) which, at a given moment, can get hold of anybody, in many cases only lasts for the period of fighting and may shortly afterwards change into feelings of guilt and moral conflict (*ibid.*). These sometimes tormenting doubts which can quickly change into unspoken feelings of guilt become apparent in the following quote:

When I was lying on my camp bed that evening, a thousand questions flashed through my mind: could I have prevented the attack? What could we have done differently or better? For what purpose was Flo killed and how is his family coping with that? Will all the wounded get well again? How are my men doing? What will become of my platoon? Even though your superiors always tell you that you couldn't have changed anything about that situation, there's always this little spark of doubt that remains. For my part, during the next three days when we were taken off active duty I was a picture of misery. I couldn't get these questions and thoughts out of my mind, and all of a sudden this protective armour that I had been wearing during the combat situations was lying next to my camp bed – now I was naked and I had to deal with the situation on my own and for my own sake.²⁶

Apart from the psychological ‘desire for combat’, all interview respondents have also mentioned the phenomenon of a social ‘yearning for combat experience’ from which some of them tried to clearly distance themselves. Apparently, there are deployed soldiers who crave for combat experience and are longing to make practical use of their theoretical knowledge at last – not only as a result of previously witnessed violence, but partly also due to the desire for a ‘combat medal’.

I absolutely don't understand comrades who are looking for combat situations. Sometimes you have to stop comrades who want this experience at any cost because that's borderline behaviour, I'd say. Then you may have to revise decisions or cancel actions which are not absolutely necessary. Anything else would be lack of responsibility. On the other hand, the desire for combat may also be something that comes naturally, if you've survived countless attacks and have seen countless other people wounded or killed. Here, the commander has a special responsibility.²⁷

Apparently, one has to differentiate between the two phenomena in this context: ‘desire for combat’ and ‘yearning for a combat medal’ do not fully coincide. The former may have ‘soldierly’ reasons: soldiers want to make use of what they have been learning for months and years, of a know-how that is the core of military business. This desire becomes even stronger, the more injuries and deaths the soldiers have seen among their

²⁵ Interview with Major n°22, deployed to Afghanistan in 2010.

²⁶ Müller, 2013, p.143.

²⁷ Interview with Captain n°23, deployed to Afghanistan in 2010.

comrades. Yearning for combat medals and craving for official recognition, however, are something entirely different. The soldiers know that those with combat experience are sure to receive a certain amount of respect from their comrades for what they have experienced and survived. There are many who would like to be part of this insider circle of approximately 5,000 soldiers,²⁸ and against this backdrop some of them actively sought involvement in combat situations, especially during the years 2010-2011. Others pick up combat experience symbolically, e.g. by their way of narrating or clothing: soldiers who have combat experience do not immediately talk about their experiences of violence during deployments, they simply have this kind of experience. Those without it talk about such an experience in the 'we form', thus including themselves in the group of experienced soldiers. The interviewees also often talked contemptuously about soldiers who rarely or never left the camp in Afghanistan but nevertheless were wearing a uniform equipped for combat when working within the camp: "*One mission is not just like any other. Those who tell the most heroic stories have never left the camp*" (interview with Major n°20, deployed to Afghanistan in 2010).

So once again it becomes clear that the elementary experience of fighting is essential to a soldier's self-perception – even in times of "hybrid" and multiple challenges. Experiences gained in combat become the "centre of gravity" for the soldiers' self-perception, even for those soldiers who are only indirectly involved in the events (Haltiner & Kümmel, 2008, p.51). However, for most of today's soldiers, the reference to this "centre of gravity" is not a simple relapse into dull, violent behavioural concepts combined with questionable role models for soldierly behaviour, handed down from earlier generations (Warburg, 2010, p.72ff). Instead, according to the numerous interviews and group discussions conducted in the context of this research, a hybrid and multifunctional self-perception seems to be predominant. And although fighting is a central part of this self-perception, it apparently does not lead to unreflective behavioural patterns.

Killing: Uncertainty, Joy about One's Own Survival and the 'Search for Meaning Afterwards'

In terms of cultural norms, killing is always a borderline case because the main purpose of establishing cultural norms for social behaviour is precisely to control and restrain acts of killing. "*A society in which killing is not being significantly restricted and most severely sanctioned would not be able to survive*" (Assmann, 1995, p.57). At this point, the question of what the soldiers think and feel when they cross this borderline and take lives needs to be examined. How do they justify the killing to themselves, how do they interpret it and how do they deal with it emotionally (Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005, p.133)? In

²⁸ This number was calculated by an officer with operational and combat experience who was able to approximately ascertain how many soldiers per contingent were involved in combat situations, how many of them were deployed for the second, third or fourth time and who knew in which years the Bundeswehr was taking part "*in active combat*" (Zimmermann, 2014). The official data provided by the Federal Ministry of Defence about the number of awarded combat medals does not offer much clarification in this respect, because the medals have sometimes been awarded based on very different criteria and also because some soldiers may have participated in more than one combat situation.

the general academic discussion about violence and war, the actual act of killing is under-represented. An intensive analysis of the act of killing seems to be as much a taboo subject as the act itself.²⁹ When ISAF soldiers return to Germany, friends and relatives often tersely inquire : “*Did you kill anyone?*”³⁰ instead of asking the usual question : “*So what was it like ?*”. Due to certain spatial distances given in most combat situations, the soldiers often do not *know* whether they have actually injured or killed someone. Having certain knowledge in this respect is very rare in military conflicts:

I had been observing the area ahead of us through my rifle scope ; then I instinctively removed the safety lever and fired four shots at the moving target dressed in grey. The person seemed to suddenly fall down ; the grey spot was still visible at the same position. My American comrade Chris said ‘Good shot’. While I was lying down in the ditch he kneeled next to me on the path, peered through his binoculars and, grinning at me, he spat out his chewing tobacco. I still wonder whether I’ve really hit someone or just scared the hell out of the wall across the path.³¹

With the remark “Good shot”, the quote above illustrates another dimension of combat which has been repeatedly alluded to in the interviews as well : fighting is part of the soldier’s craft which can be put to the test and applied in combat situations. As in every profession, solid craftsmanship is honoured in the military, and the best tools, i.e. types of weapons, are being discussed. For a civilian who is not familiar with this kind of work and who only sees injuries and death resulting from the activity, this perspective may be disconcerting or even frightening (Mann, 2014).

“*Most cases of killings in modern wars are impersonal*” (Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005, p.134). The interviewed soldiers also mentioned that in combat the act of killing was not difficult for them, due to the imminent danger from the enemy and the mostly unclear situation during the fight. In most combat situations, soldiers do not face each other when they shoot; on the contrary, the view on the other soldier (who is moving and taking cover) can be blocked by (large) distances, the terrain, bushes, buildings, etc. This is also called the “fog of combat” (*ibid.*, p.135). A corporal describes a combat situation in a village near Kunduz as follows : “*Enemy fire was sometimes so strong and there were so many buildings that we soon lost track of who was firing where at whom*” (Focken, 2013, p.63). A (fatal) hit on an opponent can only be noticed by the ceasing backfire – in most cases, the only ones who have a clear view (if at all) of the enemy to be killed are the snipers or movie heroes. Therefore, the experience of killing another person seems to remain rather abstract to most of the German soldiers with combat experience. Interestingly enough, even snipers are protected from a too direct confrontation with the act of killing by looking through their rifle scopes (Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005 ; Collins, 2011, p.583):

²⁹ Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005, p.134 ; Mann, 2014, p.51. See also Bourke, 1999.

³⁰ One soldier who after his return told his friends seriously about his experiences during the war, soon found himself alone in the room – obviously, his friends could not bear to listen to his stories (Shay, 1998).

³¹ Captain L., 2013, p.107.

It helps that we don't know who shot someone and who didn't. That's a relief. When it's obvious that the victims are terrorists, killing is OK. That's what we're here for. It's part of our assignment and of our job. Killing is legitimate when you hit the enemy. I don't have any ethical objections. I still see the images of the terrorists we have killed. They're the bad guys who want to harm us, so we act against the bad guys.³²

The paraphrases that have long been used to describe the act of killing, thereby indicating a certain speechlessness, can be explained by society's reserve and its pressure on the soldiers to legitimize their actions (Leifsen, 2011; Apelt, 2009, p.159). In our highly advanced social systems, killing is

(...) characterized by mechanisms of establishing taboos, the masking of expressions, by ignoring it, by calumnies, trivializations and other designations. Such an effort in terms of terminology is based on the deep rejection of killing inherent to most people. But at the same time, the prevailing battle conditions require the killing of others in order to secure one's own survival – it is a dilemma.³³

Therefore, the soldiers experience killing in highly contradictory ways (Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005, p.133). This may lead to a range of (emotional) reactions between desire for combat and triumph on the one hand, and a quest for meaning, feelings of guilt, compassion and remorse on the other. Directly after a fight, the soldiers are happy to have survived and maybe to have even killed the enemy. In most cases, unsettling thoughts, questions of meaning and feelings of guilt only arise after some time has passed, because the soldiers also may see “*an ominous component of hopelessness*” in the bloodshed and killing (Stietencron, 1995, p.51).

A combat situation is often chaotic – there is no order at all. Sometimes a fight arises unexpectedly, due to sudden enemy fire. Therefore, some soldiers wonder after a fight whether they have done the right things in that stressful combat situation. Soldiers can be morally unsettled by these questions as Jonathan Shay (2014, pp.182-184) has shown in his new research on the concept of “moral injury”. Shay shows that moral injury is present when a person experiences a betrayal of what she or he sees as “right”. This feeling can impair the capacity for trust and elevate despair, suicidality, and interpersonal violence and needs to be addressed separately from PTSD. Most social science studies in such contexts are focused on the victims of violence rather than on its agents. During ISAF's mission in Afghanistan, however, the soldiers not only became victims but agents as well. This perspective is hard to bear for some soldiers and, apart from moral questions, can also lead to feelings of guilt, shame and distress as well as to speechlessness and helplessness. Additional consequences may include disturbed social behaviour as well as impulse control disorders.³⁴

³² Interview with First Lieutenant n°5, deployed to Afghanistan in 2009.

³³ Ungerer, 2010, p.101.

³⁴ Interview with Dr. Zimmermann, June 10, 2011.

It is widely recognized that, along with physical and psychological injuries, war profoundly affects veterans spiritually and morally. However, research about the link between combat and changes in morality and spirituality is lacking. *Moral injury* is a construct that we have proposed to describe disruption in an individual’s sense of personal morality and capacity to behave in a just manner.

Many soldiers are nevertheless dealing quite well with the killing in battle – especially if the enemy has been identified unequivocally and if they can be sure to have successfully fought against *insurgents*. However, the natural biological scruples to kill another person have to be overcome again and again (Collins, 2011 ; Grossman, 1995). “*People do not want to kill*” (Ungerer, 2010, p. 95), and soldiers are no exception.³⁵

“*Our common humanity and this biological mechanism make killing a difficult task that inevitably leads to feelings of guilt and pain*” (Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005, p.134). When soldiers kill another human being, this act can call our inherent humanity into question. The legitimization of the use of violence by society is thus of particular significance. If one’s own group approves of the collective killing (or *imperative* to kill), the cultural concept of the *prohibition* of killing can be overcome and adequately processed. As indicated by the interview results, German ISAF soldiers sometimes not only call meaning and purpose of the mission into question, they are also aware of the poor legitimization of this robust operation on the part of German society (Wanner & Bulmahn, 2013). This dilemma needs to be resolved with regard to future kinetic operations because “*war is a state of society*” (Shay, 1998, p.10) and therefore affects everyone. The following section focuses on the soldiers’ return and on the question as to how society conceptualizes these fighters with experiences of violence and accepts them back into the community.

This type of soldier with various competencies who is not only able to fight but also to protect, to support and to act as a mediator, as demanded by a Bundeswehr slogan, became a reality early on. The soldiers had to adopt many of these competencies or improve existing capabilities when they were deployed, in order to be able to deal with the multiple challenges of operational conditions in cooperation with international comrades and civilian partners. In the early phases of the German armed forces’ reconstruction in the 1950s not all soldiers were thrilled with the prospect of now also having to train ‘soft’ competencies apart from the military, identity-creating, capabilities. In the years 2003-2006 I still heard many (older) soldiers say: “*This is no longer my Bundeswehr*”. Younger soldiers, however, regard missions abroad and the corresponding competencies or challenges as an integral part of the image of their profession and of their soldierly self-perception. They are no longer ‘just’ being socialized into the ‘old Bundeswehr culture’ but now also into an army shaped by operational culture. Secondly, these operation-specific cultural patterns of interpretation which now prevail in the Bundeswehr have, in this writer’s opinion, not led to the emergence of ‘dull fighters’ deprived of any moral conscience

³⁵ Apparently, in World War II, 80 to 85 per cent of the American soldiers did not shoot at the enemy (Marshall, 1947). This psychological barrier has been lowered considerably afterwards by better training during the wars in Korea and Vietnam (Grossman, 1995 ; Collins, 2011, pp.70-72).

during the years of heated fighting in Afghanistan. Instead, a professionalized soldier has emerged who must be able to fight in order to survive difficult and dangerous operational scenarios. Even if ‘only’ approximately 5,000 Bundeswehr soldiers have actively participated in combat situations – this new combat experience has become an important part of the cultural memory of the Bundeswehr. By now, even soldiers without operational experience know that the training they receive truly enables individuals to survive combat situations. Ever since the combat experiences of the years 2010-2011, Bundeswehr soldiers have joined other national contingents as comrades on an equal footing in the international context, and have managed to liberate themselves from the partly prevalent former image of an ‘outsider’ army of ‘shirkers’ who only serve in quiet regions.

The third point is also closely connected to this emancipation of the soldiers. Combat experiences which influence not only individuals but, moreover, structures and processes of knowledge and also the soldierly self-perception are the operational culture’s “centre of gravity”. As unsettling as experiences of violence may be in that particular moment, for many soldiers the confrontation with violence is only part of a more complex experience during a mission and in the time afterwards. And experiences of violence are not *per se* bad or unsettling/traumatizing: they are part of the military business of an organization that exercises the State’s monopoly on violence. Even if Parliament decides not to deploy any more soldiers in kinetic operations during the next few years and beyond, the combat experiences gleaned in Afghanistan will continue to have a significant impact, as a vital part of the collective memory. In Afghanistan, soldiers had the opportunity not only to practice their main military craft and to emancipate themselves as equal partners among international contingents, but also to lay down/ invent ‘new-old’ traditions, far from the burden of memories from Wehrmacht days (*cf.* Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). The ‘new culture of (unofficial) remembrance’ is only one example illustrating how the soldiers try to deal psychologically with their new experiences, embed them in rites and interpret them in sociocultural terms. Calls for an official acknowledgment of the soldiers fallen in Afghanistan, maybe even by naming barracks after dead soldiers, are another example of the need to officially fill what is perceived as the Bundeswehr’s ‘void of tradition’ with new contents and cultural patterns of interpretation to which today’s soldiers have a current connection. The future will tell if this works out and what ‘cultural long-term effects’ the experiences in Afghanistan will actually have for the Bundeswehr.

“We’re No Freaks, for Heaven’s Sake” – The Homecoming into Society

For most soldiers, after returning to Germany the Afghanistan mission is still far from over. The interview respondents repeatedly pointed out that the images of the operation are always there – they see them in their dreams at night, but also during the day the images are constantly present. This means that the ISAF mission, although officially completed at the end of 2014, will continue to have effects in the minds of those involved for quite some time. In spite of these images and the incorporated experiences of violence that have shaped the soldiers’ attitudes, it is important for the returning soldiers to emphasize: “*We’re no freaks, for heaven’s sake*” (interview with Captain n°29, deployed

to Afghanistan in 2013). This way the soldiers themselves point out that there are indeed traumatized returnees³⁶ and also soldiers who at first have problems reintegrating into a peaceful society³⁷ and getting back into 'everyday mode' – but they do not want to be generally degraded to "freaks" because of it. It goes without saying that the mission in Afghanistan has changed everyone involved, all the more so if a direct or indirect confrontation with violence and war has taken place. A sergeant major (interviewee n°7, deployed to Afghanistan in 2009) emphasized the point during a conversation : *"Of course, when you come back from a mission, you have changed. If someone comes back home unchanged, then something's wrong with him"*.

The returning soldiers have to deal with two things after arriving back in Germany : on the one hand, they must come to terms with images of combat, injuries, death, absolute poverty and behaviours from parts of the Afghan war society that are difficult to accept for their own system of values ; on the other hand, they have to find their way back into their home society which from their point of view is in many ways characterized by abundance, superficiality and waste of time. This period of transition³⁸ between the country of deployment and their home country which can last for several weeks or even months can be influenced by a so-called 'homecomer's culture shock' (see also Weibull, 2012). If their own value criteria have changed due to the poverty and hardship seen in Afghanistan, it is especially difficult for the soldiers to readapt to the circumstances of their home society. Most of the returning soldiers tell us in their stories that the confrontation with absolute poverty, violence and death made them appreciate the small things in life. This also becomes clear in the book *Operation Heimkehr* ("Operation Homecoming", by Würich & Scheffer, 2014) where a range of different Bundeswehr members talk about their interpretation of the mission and about how they had changed when they returned from Afghanistan. Dr. Zimmermann describes similar experiences (interview on June 10, 2011) from a soldier's point of view:

I come home, but no one wants to hear what happened to me ; no one understands me and the new values I have developed on this mission. I have suffered, I want to be understood, but nobody in my environment is interested in what I've experienced. The time of our deployment has been extreme, and all they care about here in Germany are TV casting shows like DSDS [a German version of 'American Idol', MT]. Everything is so trivial, all this frantic consumption, etc.

³⁶ Experiences of violence can be potentially traumatizing, but they do not necessarily lead to a PTSD condition. Who is traumatized at which moment, in what manner and by which event always depends on a variety of different factors. *"Thus the killing is at times banal and not traumatic ; it is not too easy, nor too hard to bear"* (Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005, p.150).

³⁷ Jonathan Shay noticed that the war experiences of Vietnam veterans resemble the events already described in Homer's antique epic *Iliad* – problems with reintegration were mentioned there as well, some of them lasting for years. Along these lines, a Vietnam veteran emphasized : *"I truly haven't slept for twenty years..."* (Shay, 1998, p.17)

³⁸ The German Navy has a lot of operational experience and is thus aware of these problems with reintegration. Whenever possible, after a completed mission far away from us in geographical terms such as off the Somali coast, they ship soldiers to a so-called "harbour for Europeanization" in order to make it easier for them to get used to the western way of life again, before going back to their families.

In many cases, soldiers with combat experience who have been directly confronted with their own mortality now appreciate their home more than they did before. Often they have also experienced a strengthening of their value system – virtues such as honesty, politeness, reliability and taking care of each other now (once again) have a higher importance. Combat experiences can trigger a certain self-assurance which helps to regain one’s “*own wholeness*” (Moeller, 1992, p.89). Suppressed or dormant facets of one’s own personality are being revived/ lived out under the completely different conditions of a violent confrontation.

In view of the fact that after a mission soldiers have to make that step away from the order to use violence and the scenarios of war towards a society in which violence is prohibited and peace is the norm, warriors are being consciously re-socialized in many cultures (Schwelling, 2010; see also Shay, 1998). This often takes place in purifying rituals with the aim of relieving the warriors of their burdening images, neutralizing the violence and paving the way for their return to ‘normalcy’. Being agents and victims of violence at the same time, soldiers have to be reintegrated and social relationships with them need to be resumed and defined anew (Stietencron, 1995, p.51). In his field research in war-torn Mozambique, Portuguese ethnologist Paulo Granjo demonstrated how communities over the past years have given priority to ensuring that returning soldiers were confronted with their traumatizing experiences and their possible feelings of guilt. For this purpose, purifying rituals were performed which always have been and still are based on the local exegesis of fateful events:

They (the rituals, MT) allow, simultaneously, the confinement of post-war actions as an exceptional situation and expurgate the individual veteran from being in danger and being considered a danger to the community. It allows him to be proclaimed a new man, entitled to a fresh start inside the community. In addition to its importance for the individual reintegration of veterans, the generalized performance of such rituals also played and plays an important role in allowing the community members to accept previous enemies/ veterans as ‘people like the others’.³⁹

With regard to the psychological well-being of the returning soldiers it is vital for them to be accepted and admitted by society as ‘people like you and me’. Against this backdrop, Granjo points out the contrast to the American soldiers who returned after the Vietnam War and were fully accepted by society but nevertheless were always regarded as ‘others’. In Mozambique, the purifying rituals help those who have suffered from hardship or from the most brutal forms of violence to regain the status of a ‘normal person’ and to be thus reintegrated into society. Contrary to western psychotherapy, this ritual purification taking place in private as well as in public does explicitly *not* address the traumatizing events (Granjo, 2007, pp.386-387). Addressing the explicit events and atrocities of war is regarded as dangerous for the returning soldier as well as for the society. Instead, *rites de passage* (van Gennep, 1909) enable veterans to be officially accepted back into the community, granting them “*a fresh start*” (Granjo, 2007, p.382).

³⁹ Granjo, 2007, p.382.

It goes without saying that rituals from a country so far away as Mozambique, developed over centuries within the local sociocultural context of faith, cannot simply be applied to western societies. Nevertheless, we may learn from Granjo's case study that the fact that society reintegrates these men and women as 'normal people' and does not let them become 'psycho-pathologized strangers' or 'marginal men' (Park, 1928 ; Mannitz, 2013) can be of the highest importance for the psychological well-being of returning soldiers as well as for their self-esteem. In today's German society, soldiers are often marked as being special "*so that their experiences may be excluded as particular ones*" (Langer, 2013, p.86). People do not feel any obligation to accept them as normal experiences into our living environment by entering into a direct confrontation with the experienced violence. In other words, experiences of violence are not being integrated into society ; instead, the affected soldiers are being stigmatized by focusing on psychopathology.

For his part, social scientist Phil Langer sees the ISAF soldiers with experiences of violence as outsiders who "*cannot be integrated, isolated from social discourse*" (Langer, 2013, p.84). According to him, the military personnel in question are being re-victimized and their experiences isolated as abnormal instead of being integrated and reinterpreted. "*From a psychoanalytical point of view, it is logical to speak of a 'crooked cure' by individualizing in psychological terms the subject of experiences which are actually related to the entire society*" (*ibid.*, p.83), For this post-heroic society⁴⁰ as a whole, "*the abstinence from violence is the decisive moment of social cohesion in modern times*" (Reemtsma, 2008, quoted in Langer, 2013). Problematizing the experiences of violence helps to maintain the status of violence as a transgression of society's canon of values. Society uses the perspective on returning soldiers as traumatized, which manifests itself in a variety of movies, TV series and theatre plays, to protect itself from a more thorough discussion of the soldiers' experiences of violence.

However, war and warlike conflicts cannot be particularized and should not be avoided by post-war society. Experiences of violence are not only "stored" in narrations and "archived" in language, they are also incorporated into bodies, movements, gestures, (unofficial) rituals and objects (Bendix, 1996, p.169). If these "*experiences of violence inscribed into someone's body and actions*" are not being addressed or treated, if necessary, they may yet be passed on to one's own environment or even to following generations through non-discursive, unconscious social practices.⁴¹

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to investigate the soldiers' subjective perceptions and interpretations of military violence as well as the response of German society to these particular experiences. Interviews with Bundeswehr soldiers with combat experience have

⁴⁰ In view of the increasing amount of violence in missions abroad, close relatives/ partners/ children see their soldier relatives deployed abroad as *heroes* – a category that had not played any role before 2007, not even with the soldiers' families (Tomforde, 2015b).

⁴¹ Shay, 1998: pp. 263-265 ; Pichler, 2011, p.187 ; Weiss & Six-Hohenbalken, 2011, p.7.

demonstrated that, even in the military context, violence is being interpreted in highly different ways. It can have both abominable and positive aspects. As unsettling as such experiences may be in that particular moment, for many soldiers the confrontation with violence is only part of a more complex experience during a mission as well as afterwards. Externally, the armed forces represent the State's monopoly on the use of force. As members of this State organization, the soldiers are trained in the use of violence and sent on sometimes robust missions mandated by Parliament. During these operations, they will have to make use of their trained skills in combat situations. For the soldiers, violence is the ‘gravitational centre’ which is not only the basis for core military training but also for the emergence of a soldierly identity. The training for and performance of military violence is an essential part of a professional soldier's view of his profession. Therefore we need to understand that for many members of the military, violence is not an automatic source of trauma: it is part of what is expected of them as well as of their professional self-image. In most cases, soldiers are able to deal quite well with experiences of violence as an integral part of their soldierly assignment in the country of deployment.

The military is a violent corporate body for which precisely the elementary experiences of fighting, killing and dying are of vital importance with regard to its self-perception. Even in the bureaucratic military organization of peacetime operations, the combat-oriented self-perception is maintained by operational experience, by legends, explicit normative demands and also by upholding military traditions. As a political institution of the State and the society, the military shapes soldiers as well as civilians and thereby produces the *homo militaris*.⁴²

This article has shown that this *homo militaris* is much more than just a ‘dumb warrior’, let alone a ‘freak’, and that violence in the context of deployments abroad is being experienced and interpreted in a variety of ways. The experience of violence is not taken as an opportunity to distance oneself from the values and norms of the native peaceful society. Combat experiences are acknowledged by one's comrades. Nevertheless, they carefully examine under which circumstances these combat experiences have been acquired and how the respective soldier is dealing with them. Apparently, a soldier does not gain a higher status among his comrades for having received the combat medal or for displaying a martial demeanour, but because of his actual operational experiences. Word of these experiences spreads quickly among the others. The ‘postmodern fighter’ is no martial soldier but a (culturally) sensitive, professional and critical citizen in uniform (Tomforde, 2015 ; Hajjar, 2014).

For the soldiers, the use of force can (in different time frames) lead to feelings of elation, euphoria and guilt, questions about meaning, doubts about oneself, an altered framework of values or, in the worst case, even to traumas. After their return, the soldiers look for ways to come to terms with their emotions, to tell their stories, to maintain their legitimization for fighting during a mission and to talk about the normality of the presence

⁴² Hagen, 2013, p.47.

of violence in the context of a deployment. To do so, they for instance write their own war memoirs, become members of veterans’ associations or motorcycle clubs, get themselves mission-related tattoos, set up small ‘Afghanistan shrines’ in the living room or establish personal commemoration days (Zimmermann, 2014 ; Kleinreesink & Moelker, 2012).

Violence does not only belong to the realm of the pathological but is woven into the very fabric of normal everyday life. Thus we do not see violence as something that is inherently pathological or traumatic. One needs to proceed with a careful phenomenological account of violence from the perspective of agents.⁴³

The generally prevalent image of soldiers with post-traumatic disorders as ‘freaks’ must be countered by a more complex one, thus getting away from psycho-stigmatization towards a complex domestic picture of how we are dealing with ever-changing experiences of violence. This domestic picture of experiences and interpretations of violence on the part of the soldiers will then allow us to develop a better understanding of violence as a complex phenomenon.

Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to find culturally adequate ways and means to reintegrate soldiers with experiences of violence as full members into the peaceful German society and to address their experiences in a joint effort in order to avoid traumas of any kind. In many cases, the German society is helpless when faced with returning soldiers, torn between a fear of re-militarization due to their combat experiences and pity for those who have suffered emotional damage. However, in this respect it is also important not to perceive the German population as a monolithic block, even if many social scientists like to describe it as such compared to the military (King, 2013, p.429). Especially in the years after 2009, the discussion in the media of war experiences during the ISAF mission has become more and more differentiated and has shown various facets of combat reality, day-to-day mission routines, and trauma-free homecomings.⁴⁴ Now that the ISAF mission (officially completed at the end of 2014) is behind us, it is essential that this differentiated perspective not subside and that the soldiers who have come back home not be left alone with their experiences and the omnipresent pictures of violence. It matters for the soldiers and their self-perceptions that they not be generally perceived as ‘freaks’.

In terms of organizational culture, leaving the ‘practice space’ of the Cold War has contributed to a professionalization of military personnel and also of the organization Bundeswehr as a whole, leading to a transformation towards postmodern armed forces. The (relatively few) soldiers who have actually participated in combat situations are at the centre of this process. But the transformation driven by the new experience of military violence goes deeper : it affects all other soldiers, both with and without operational

⁴³ Bar & Ben-Ari, 2005, p.151.

⁴⁴ A good example for a differentiated picture of mission reality is the two-part documentary “Unser Krieg” (“Our War”), aired by ZDF (the second German TV channel) in October 2013. This multifaceted documentary includes not only official recordings by the journalists but also images captured by the soldiers themselves with the camcorder attached to their helmets or with their smartphones. These different sources provide more complex insights into the day-to-day mission routine in Afghanistan.

experience, as a force challenging all stakeholders in positive as well as negative terms. Neither the Bundeswehr as organization nor German society can evade this transformative impact – and indeed they must not. German society thus has a great responsibility for the soldiers whom it has sent and maybe will continue to send into military conflicts as a parliamentary army.

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