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DOI: 10.2478/cmc-2024-0021

SVETOVNI PRVAKI V USPOSABLJANJU: ZAPLETENO RAZMERJE NEMČIJE Z VOJAŠKIMI SILAMI ZA SPECIALNO DELOVANJE

WORLD CHAMPIONS IN TRAINING: GERMANY'S DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS MILITARY SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Povzetek Primeri skrajno desničarskega ekstremizma v nemškem poveljstvu specialnih sil kopenske vojske (Kommando Spezialkräfte Heer, KSK) se že več let uvrščajo na naslovnice mednarodnih medijev. Ogorčenje nemške javnosti in zahteva po spremembah sta ponudila priložnost za prestrukturiranje ne le KSK, temveč vseh nemških vojaških sil za specialno delovanje (GERSOF). Pričujoči prispevek zagovarja, da je celovita prenova potrebna zaradi številnih izzivov, s katerimi se spoprijemajo GERSOF, vendar je bil zagon izgubljen zaradi odnosov med nemško vlado in ključnimi deležniki, vključno z mediji. Prispevek na podlagi teorije akterjev in omrežij raziskuje te zapletene odnose in ponazarja, zakaj je vlada zapravila priložnosti za okrepitev GERSOF kot elementa nacionalne varnosti in za ponovno potrditev zavezanosti zaveznikom.

Ključne besede *GERSOF, Kommando Spezialkräfte Heer, Kommando Spezialkräfte Marine, Nemčija, Natove sile za specialno delovanje.*

Abstract Incidents of far-right extremism in the German Kommando Spezialkräfte Heer (KSK) have captured international headlines for years. The public outcry in Germany and the demand for change offered an opportunity to restructure not only the KSK but all German Military Special Operations Forces (GERSOF). This article contends that a substantial overhaul is necessary due to the numerous challenges that GERSOF face, but that momentum was lost due to the relations between the German government and key stakeholders, including the media. Informed by the Actor-Network Theory, the article explores these intricate relations, illustrating why the government squandered the opportunities to strengthen GERSOF as an element of national security and to reaffirm its commitment to its allies.

Key words *German Special Operations Forces, Kommando Spezialkräfte Heer, Kommando Spezialkräfte Marine, Germany, NATO Special Operations Forces.*

Introduction

The scandals broke in the spring of 2017, when German media uncovered far-right sympathies and extremism within the Kommando Spezialkräfte Heer (KSK). Several media outlets and public figures called for the disbandment of the Special Operation Force, which did not happen. Instead, three years later, then-Secretary of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer introduced a catalogue of sixty reform measures to the public. These measures addressed key elements of the KSK, such as selection, training, career development and command-and-control (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2021a). Despite the number and scope of these actions, they were, in fact, quite modest in scale. Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, then-chair of the German Parliament's Defence Committee, was among the few who—in keeping with the adage “never let a crisis go to waste”—had envisioned a more comprehensive transformation of the German Military Special Operations Forces (GERSOF). She criticised the restrained nature of the sixty measures and preferred a GERSOF overhaul which would have centralised them under the Ministry of Defence and the Inspector General, instead of allowing them to remain within their respective military services (Strack-Zimmermann, 2020; Szymanski, 2021).

This article contends that integrating GERSOF under the Ministry would have been beneficial both nationally and internationally. Nationally, it would have addressed several significant challenges faced by GERSOF. Internationally, it could have signalled support and commitment to numerous allies. Ultimately, the article suggests that the KSK scandals were a missed opportunity, and offers insights into why the German government opted for moderate rather than comprehensive reforms. To do so, it discusses the intricate relations between the government and its key stakeholders, which include the public, the media and the parliament, all of whom would have condemned any governmental initiatives perceived as empowering GERSOF.

It may be argued that redesigning the KSK, or the broader GERSOF, in a manner that would strengthen their influence on Germany's national security was inappropriate, given that some KSK personnel exhibited criminal, undemocratic and downright repulsive behaviours. However, in line with its commitment to national and collective defence (Ministry of Defence, 2023), the government could have reformed the KSK and GERSOF in a manner similar to the approaches taken by Germany's neighbouring countries and the wider European community. During the 2010s, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark established Special Operations Commands (SOCOMs) (Tjepkema, 2018). Poland elevated its military SOF to a military branch (Pawlikowicz, 2023). Similarly, other European nations, including Estonia and Norway, have created SOF entities (Mattelaer, 2016). Mattelaer rightly noted that “[a]cross Europe strategic-level SOF-structures have boomed” (2016, p 1). The establishment of Russia's SOCOM in 2013 likely spurred some of these governments to bolster their SOF (Baker et al., 2023). Some European countries were also motivated by financial considerations, with scholars commenting on the trend to downsize conventional armies yet to invest in the restructuring of SOF capabilities (Askund Johnsen & Højstrup Christensen, 2016). Combining SOF “under a single, unified structure is about keeping up with international best practices and fostering

that capability with the highest return on investment in a context of austerity” (Mattelaer, 2016, p 8). Germany and its military SOF did not join these security developments, and it remains among the smaller number of countries which have not “structured their SOF appropriately, in organizational terms, to fully optimize their employment and development” (Goh, 2011, p 2). The case of GERSOF stands apart from the still ongoing trend seen elsewhere, for instance in Ireland, where the Army Ranger Wing is undergoing restructuring, and in Sweden, the newest member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Gallagher, 2023; Clark, 2024).

NATO has been adamant about improving the functionality of SOF since the mid-2000s, particularly in the realm of command and control (Goh, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Tjepkema, 2018). In 2006, the NATO SOF Coordination Center was established and, by 2010, had grown into the NATO Special Operations Headquarters (NSHQ), with participation from all NATO members and several NATO partner nations (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024). As the NATO SOF continued to evolve—in 2023, NSHQ became the Allied Special Operations Forces Command to synchronise with other NATO Theatre Component Commands—Germany received multiple direct and indirect encouragements to optimise GERSOF. For instance, Admiral (ret.) William McRaven, then-commander of the United States (U.S.) SOCOM, launched the global SOF network, geared towards closer and more effective cooperative security (Robinson et al., 2018). Another initiative was the SOF institution-building advisory approach developed by NATO, in collaboration with SOCOM Europe, in 2016. It was designated to “support specific NATO Allies and select partners in their development of special operations command (SOCOM)-like structures” (Stringer, 2023, p 76). Given NATO’s urging, the need to reform the KSK following the scandals offered the German government not only an opportunity to reorganise GERSOF in line with its European neighbours, but also to signal its support and commitment to its numerous NATO allies. Thus, Germany’s decision not to capitalise on the KSK crisis represents a missed opportunity at both the national and international level.

To better understand the government’s decision, this article takes a relational approach. It is broadly informed by the Actor-Network Theory, namely the understanding that “The actor network is reducible neither to an actor alone nor to a network ... An actor network is simultaneously an actor whose activity is networking heterogeneous elements and a network that is able to redefine and transform what it is made of” (Callon, 1987, p 93). The German government is interpreted as an actor constituted, enabled and constrained through its heterogeneous relations with the public, the media and the parliament. This approach helps to contextualise GERSOF within the complex interactions and entanglements between the three key stakeholders and the German government, suggesting why the latter did not pursue comprehensive modifications of its military SOF. An in-depth analysis of the government’s intricate reasons would easily exceed the scope of this paper. Therefore, the article adopts an approach aligned with Cordella and Shaikh, who note that “[b]y limiting the level or focus of the investigation it is possible to study and understand some of the relationships that are shaping both actors and the relational networks” (2003, p 4).

To tame the complexity underlying the current topic, the article primarily pursues the goal of bringing-into-relation rather than explaining specific mechanisms behind the government's decision. Consequently, the article outlines rather than defines the respective relations, entanglements and interactions. This approach aligns with the scholarship of, for example, Norton Wise, and his concept of pursuing understanding instead of explanation as a means to address social complexity (Wise et al., 2004).

The methodological approach of making the article exploratory rather than explanatory is particularly suitable given the scarcity of scholarship on GERSOF and the numerous scholarly gaps the article confronts—all the more so, considering that the existing studies on GERSOF are largely outdated. In 2007, Timo Noetzel and Benjamin Schreer provided a crucial overview of the military and political context of GERSOF. However, their work predates the introduction of the Kommando Spezialkräfte Marine (KSM) in 2014, the most recent configuration of the German combat swimmers. The same holds true for Lars Werner's excellent 2013 enquiry into the organisational architecture of GERSOF. Werner's criticism of the limited influence of GERSOF at the strategic military level remains valid today, as this article will demonstrate. More recently, military historian Martin Rink (2022) offered an in-depth analysis of the KSK formation in the 1990s. Using archival primary sources, Rink discussed some of the military, governmental and public challenges and repercussions that the KSK faced during its establishment and early years. The scepticism towards GERSOF that Rink describes in his work is still prevalent today, as the current article will suggest.

The article consists of two parts. The first part begins with an introduction of GERSOF, including the KSK's far-right scandals, and moves on to a discussion of the challenges they experience, suggesting how they might have benefitted from a centralising restructuring. In the second part, the article turns to the critical stance of the public and the media towards GERSOF, then proceeds to outline how the parliament uses GERSOF as a pawn to question and criticise the government. In doing so, the second part presents what Wise termed "conditions of possibility" or—more appropriately in the current case—"conditions of limited possibility" for the German government, which resulted in a crisis gone to waste (Wise, 2004).

1 THE GERSOF

The KSM comprises approximately 400 personnel, while the KSK has a staff of between 1,200 and 1,500 (Geiger & Forkert, 2022; Mgb, 2024). The count of operators is significantly lower, namely in the low three-digit range for both the KSM and KSK combined (Geiger & Forkert, 2022; Berbner, 2022). International scholars predominantly focus on the KSK, particularly following the emergence of the far-right scandals. This attention often leads to the neglect of the German Combat Swimmers (Kampfschwimmer). They date back to 1958, and the first Combat Swimmers Company (Kampfschwimmer-Kompanie) formed in 1964 (Mathe, 2018). This year, on 11 July 2024, the German Combat Swimmers officially celebrated their

60th anniversary (Freytag, 2024). Despite their long history, they have not faced any public allegations of far-right extremism.

The Combat Swimmers' younger sibling, the KSK, has been operational since 1996. An internationally circulating narrative suggests that the KSK was founded in response to events during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when German citizens had to be evacuated by the Belgian SOF due to the Germans' lack of suitable SOF capabilities. However, Rink's recent examination of archival sources suggests that as early as 1992 the German parliament and the secretary of defence were "well aware that the Bundeswehr was in some need for [sic] Special Operations Forces," with initial plans for what would become the KSK already in place by 1993, prior to the events in Rwanda (Rink, 2022, pp 166–7). Thus, the prevalent international narrative about the KSK's foundation should be treated with caution. Indeed, the Bundeswehr command has stated that the Germans in Rwanda could have been rescued by German military forces with units "already on stand-by to deploy to Africa as quickly as possible" (Busch, 2020, p 57). Ultimately, the events in Rwanda likely made it easier to persuade critics of the need for another military special operations capability.

As a maritime SOF, the KSM traditionally views bodies of water as areas of activities and combat, whereas the KSK more commonly uses them for transport. However, the KSM and the KSK share a spectrum of capabilities. These include responding to high-jackings and hostage rescues (in-extremis capabilities) as well as providing military assistance, special reconnaissance, counter-terrorism and conducting covert operations such as sabotage (Bundeswehr: Navy Special Operations Forces Command 2024; Bundeswehr: Special Operations Forces, 2024). Since 2016, the KSM and the KSK have maintained close collaboration with a squadron of the German Air Force, specifically the 4th Squadron of the 64th Helicopter Wing (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2021b). Furthermore, both the KSM and the KSK rely on numerous support elements. According to an older source, these enablers constitute up to 80% of the KSK (Noetzel & Schreer, 2007). Among GERSOF enthusiasts, both the KSM and the KSK are generally considered "Tier-1" SOF, denoting the high level of their capabilities. However, the official tier system originated with the USSOF and refers to differences in command-and-control structures, rather than SOF capabilities. Tier-1 and Tier-2 forces have distinct chains of command. Due to the differences between the U.S. and German SOFs, applying the two tier-system to the latter offers little value for understanding them.

Serving under the ethos of German democracy, GERSOF personnel are expected to be "personality and conscienceguided [sic] individuals" (Behnke, 2022, p 189). According to Bundeswehr doctrine, GERSOF members, regarded as "citizens in uniform," are required to rigorously uphold and continuously defend the German constitution (Grundgesetz) (Behnke, 2022, p 189). However, the KSK has been embroiled in far-right misconduct since its formation in the 1990s (Hock & Schweppe, 2020). At that time, its personnel maintained close ties with Wehrmacht veterans, regularly inviting them to the KSK garrison in Calw (Rose, 2009). In the early

2000s, then-KSK commander Reinhard Günzel declared that the KSK's historical roots lay with the Brandenburger, an elite Wehrmacht division (Rose, 2009). "From my troops, I expect discipline akin to that of the Spartans, the Romans or the Waffen SS," Günzel stated (Rose, 2009, p 91). Some KSK personnel also exhibited right-wing ideologies during the 2000s, notably when they created and displayed insignia suggestive of the Wehrmacht Afrika Korps during their deployment to Afghanistan (Rose, 2009).

The far-right problem was not effectively addressed in the 2000s, and the extremist sympathies persisted into the 2010s. In 2015, a KSK officer and trainer began establishing a network of chat groups under the alias Hannibal. These chats were mainly used to discuss the consequences of Germany's refugee policy and potential civil war scenarios (Hock & Schweppe, 2020). At least two other KSK soldiers were involved (Hock & Schweppe, 2020). The network extended beyond an online presence: Hannibal founded the so-called Uniter Network as a non-profit organization which started out as "a network of active and former members of special forces from federal and state level police" and expanded to include individuals outside the specialized professions (Flade, 2021, p 4). In-depth investigations into Uniter revealed Hannibal's attempts to build "a right-wing prepper network" (Erb, 2020; Erb et al., 2020). An investigation against Hannibal launched in 2017.

In April 2017, a farewell party for the commander of the 2nd KSK company made the news because it included company members listening to far-right rock music and performing the Nazi salute (Grabler, Leiffels & Jolmes, 2017). Both the gesture and the use of other NSDAP party symbols are illegal in Germany. Listening to far-right music can also be deemed illegal under certain circumstances, and Bundeswehr personnel found engaging in this activity typically face investigations (Oppel et al., 2022). Other aspects of the farewell party added to the general criticism, including the hiring of a female escort for the departing commander and the tossing of a pig's head (Grabler et al., 2017; ZEIT, 2017). In May 2020, police raided the home of a member of the 2nd company who had been with the KSK since 2001. The authorities secured weapons, explosives, ammunition and numerous Nazi memorabilia (Schweppe, 2020a; ZEIT, 2020; Schaaf, 2023).

From 2017 until 2021, around 50 KSK personnel were investigated for far-right extremism (Hock & Schweppe, 2020; ZEIT Online, dpa & sls, 2021; Wehrbeauftragte des Bundestages, 2024). Depending on the figures used for KSK personnel, this represents about 3-4% of all KSK members, which may seem like a limited issue, especially if these individuals could be easily replaced. However, if the 50 or so KSK personnel were active SOF operators, the far-right problem would represent a more pronounced security concern, also because there may not have been any operators to replace them with, potentially increasing security vulnerabilities. The more comprehensive the reorganization of the KSK would have been, the higher the probability of breaking up the far-right ideologies and traditions that had festered in the KSK since its establishment.

2 GERSOF'S INTRA-MILITARY CHALLENGES

Instead of a unified command structure with joint oversight, the Army and Navy hold the stewardship of the KSK and the KSM, respectively. The KSK falls under the Army's Rapid Forces Division (Division Schnelle Kräfte), which comprises approximately 20,000 soldiers in light and highly mobile infantry (Bundeswehr: Division Schnelle Kräfte 2024). The German Army showcases the KSK as its "best trained soldiers," emphasising the force's in-extremis capabilities (Bundeswehr Service Bund, 2024). The KSM is integrated into Flotilla 1 (Einsatzflottille 1), one of the German Navy's three principal formations, which also includes corvettes, submarines, reconnaissance ships, minehunters and the naval infantry (Bundeswehr: Deutsche Marine: Flotilla 1, 2024). These units primarily focus on littoral operations, yet the KSM is adept at operating globally across various environments, including the desert.

The responsibility of the services over their respective SOF extends beyond mere administrative duties. They must ensure their SOF's operational readiness. This includes tasks such as education and training, human resources management, and material procurement. However, both branches face significant challenges in fulfilling these responsibilities. Notably, the German Kampfschwimmer lack their own swimming facility and have relied on the availability of other military pools, as their designated facility has been under construction for fourteen years and remains incomplete (Wehrbeauftragte des Bundestages, 2022; Frank, 2023; Wehrbeauftragte des Bundestages, 2023). The KSM have also encountered difficulties in obtaining essential medical equipment (Wehrbeauftragte des Bundestages, 2022). Meanwhile, the KSK highlights the scarcity of resources more generally, noting that it has managed the training and "workload of a brigade, but has [only] been equipped like a battalion" for decades (Generalinspekteur der Bundeswehr, 2021, p 30).

GERSOF's equipment challenges are not only caused by the Army and the Navy but are also rooted in the Bundeswehr's inefficient procurement system (Wohlgethan & Specht, 2023). For instance, similar to the long-awaited swimming hall, the KSM has been waiting for new rigid-hull inflatable boats (RHIBs) for years. The absence of these boats significantly impacts not only training, but also teaching (Wehrbeauftragte des Bundestages, 2023). The Bundeswehr's procurement department initially outlined a set of requirements for RHIBs that the German industry deemed technologically unfeasible (Masala, 2023). Following a revision of the requirements, the delivery of the new boats to the KSM is now anticipated by 2025 or 2026 (Deutscher Bundestag, 2023). The underlying issue is the inadequate communication between the Bundeswehr's procurement staff and the individual service branches, in this case the Navy (Masala, 2023).

This situation contrasts starkly with the ambitious plans that the government has for GERSOF. In the coming years, Germany intends to contribute the second-largest contingent of special military forces to NATO, trailing only the U.S. (Flade & Pinkert,

2022; Autorenteam Kommando Spezialkräfte, 2024). To achieve this, GERSOF will need to undergo significant expansion. The KSM will grow to contribute a second Special Operations Maritime Task Group (SOMTG) to NATO, post-2028, a third SOMTG is planned (Sünkler, 2023). This expansion requires the KSM to increase its personnel from 400 to 600, necessitating substantial structural adjustments, as outlined in the KSM2023+ plan initiated in April 2023 (Sünkler, 2023; Weisswange, 2023). This plan includes the formation of two new units: a Special Operations Boat Company and a Support Company. A KSM training centre will replace the current training group (Gruppe Ausbildung). This is not the first major transformation for the Kampfschwimmer. Their history has been characterized by organizational dynamism and adaptability, with structural changes taking place in the 1990s and 1980s (Mathe, 2018). More recently, the German Combat Swimmers were an element of the Naval Specialized Forces (Verband der Spezialisierten Einsatzkräfte Marine) alongside boarding units, clearance divers and other units (Mathe, 2018). They became an independent formation in 2014, when the KSM was established. The force's recent leadership experience during Mission Gazelle in Niger—"the largest SOF operation of the Bundeswehr in terms of the size of the task force to date"—will likely aid in managing and optimizing the growth in personnel in the years to come (Bundeswehr Journal, 2023).

Arguably the most pressing challenge currently facing both the KSM and the KSK is the persistent difficulty in finding suitable candidates. As of May 2022, only about 83% of the military positions in the KSK were filled (Flade & Pinkert, 2022). The proportion of filled operator positions was significantly lower, at approximately 67% (Flade & Pinkert, 2022). As recently as in January and March 2024, the KSK reported problems attracting enough suitable candidates (Buckenmaier, 2024; Mgb, 2024). This recruitment challenge has been an ongoing issue since the KSK's inception (Michelis, 2010). The government's response to this problem has been inadequate. German policymakers exhibit a contradictory stance, committing GERSOF to more significant roles within NATO, while failing to furnish the force with the necessary resources, infrastructure and other forms of support. By integrating and unifying the service-specific SOF capabilities into a joint capability within the German Ministry of Defence (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung), an organizational restructuring could have mitigated some of the KSK's and the KSM's problems. This approach would have allowed GERSOF to consolidate their resources, exert more influence in the procurement process, and eliminate unnecessary functional redundancies.

Prior to the implementation of the KSK reform catalogue, the highest military authority for both the KSM and the KSK within the Ministry of Defence was Section SE I 5, situated in the military intelligence department. Due to its limited authority, this section was unable to provide significant long-term stewardship to GERSOF. Its role at the military-strategic level primarily involved issuing recommendations on special operations and advising on SOF to other staff elements within the Ministry (Werner, 2013). An advantage of SE I 5 was that it provided a clear point of access to GERSOF at the military-strategic level. This changed with the introduction of the

KSK reforms. As of July 2024, the Ministry's organigram indicates that GERSOF are now represented in three of the Ministry's departments: (1) the Department of Military Strategy, Deployment and Operations (Abteilung Militärstrategie, Einsatz und Operationen), (2) the Department of Planning (Abteilung Planung) and (3) the Department of Armament (Abteilung Rüstung) (Organisationsplan BMVg, 2024). This current organizational structure places GERSOF in a more compartmentalized, hierarchical and procedural organizational environment than before—a situation typically cautioned against (Goh, 2011; Svendsen, 2014; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2017). The organizational fragmentation contrasts with the European trend towards centralizing SOF at the military-strategic level, and is likely to further impede GERSOF jointness and readiness while perpetuating previous difficulties.

Moreover, the new organizational set-up separates GERSOF from the military intelligence elements to which SE I 5 belonged. This separation may result in the suboptimal utilization of SOF capabilities, particularly in securing intelligence relevant to national interests and security. Additionally, it further isolates the German SOF from their counterparts in other European countries. In Italy, for instance, intelligence agencies have increasingly been working closer with the SOF (Moon, 2018).

The current organizational structure also leads to a closer cooperation between GERSOF and their conventional counterparts, which may create additional challenges. SOF are perceived as non-hierarchical, less bureaucratic and prone to bending rules, often displaying a lack of respect for higher-ranking officers and other authorities (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Falster Holm, 2019). Conventional forces are, in many ways, the opposite of SOF, and may find fault with SOF's mindset and values. Historically, this has led to a less efficient and effective cooperation while increasing the risk of conventionalizing SOF through tasks and processes unsuited for them (Cohen, 1978; Clancy, 2001; King & White, 2017; McIntosh, 2022; Gielas, 2024).

3 THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF GERSOF

During the investigations of 2017 and the following years, the sentiment that Germany might not need the KSK and, by extension, GERSOF as a whole, emerged in some segments of German society (Deutsche Friedensgesellschaft, 2021). At times, hostility towards the military SOF overshadowed the discussion about the future of the force (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 2021). Some members of the German parliament (Bundestag) vocally expressed their adversarial views, contending that Kramp-Karrenbauer, along with the government, failed to recognize “the fact that the special force, established in 1996, operates as an insular barracked men's club, significantly detached from any democratic control” (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022, p 2). These parliamentarians questioned whether the KSK was reformable at all. Additionally, various media outlets and public figures voiced scepticism about the continued existence of the KSK (Heyer, 2021; LabourNet, 2023).

The situation was compounded by earlier experiences with the KSK, particularly during its deployments to Afghanistan following the events of 9/11 (Deutscher Bundestag, 2010; Schaaf, 2023). These missions were the most publicized KSK operations to date. Political decision-makers sent 100 KSK operators to Afghanistan in 2001, and the force remained there, with fluctuating numbers, until the evacuation operations in Kabul in 2021 (Ehrhart, 2011; Berbner, 2022; Uzulis, 2024). The involvement of the Kampfschwimmer in Afghanistan remains unclear (Schaaf, 2023). The newspaper Tagesspiegel reported, “Targeted killings by Bundeswehr SOF have definitely been ruled out by the Ministry of Defence. However, the Bundeswehr’s KSK have been deployed to eliminate networks of extremists” (Müller, 2010). The KSK was temporarily embedded in the U.S. command-and-control structure and participated in several engagements against Taliban and al-Qaeda forces, including the Battle of Tora Bora and Operation Anaconda (Bleibohm, 2014). The operations of the KSK were the object of permanent suspicion and speculation. German politicians and national security experts fuelled public speculation about potential human-rights abuses in Afghanistan, including Winfried Nachtwei, who noted that GERSOF personnel were “out of reach of parliamentary control” (Nachtwei, 2011, p 207; Fröhling, 2008; Rose, 2009). Resisting public examination, the KSK appeared “a priori illegal and immoral” to the German public, which values transparency and openness as the hallmarks of a healthy democratic society (Horn, 2012, p 112).

The public’s distrust and scepticism have not been limited to GERSOF but generally apply to the Bundeswehr as a whole. According to some experts, these attitudes are rooted in Germany’s experiences during the Second World War (Müller, 2022; Biggs, 2023). The international press frequently quotes Bundeswehr personnel with statements such as, “A lot of Germans think of us as murderers. They hate us. And those that don’t hate us couldn’t care less about us” (Barkin, 2019). Germans generally pride themselves on their democratic values and generally like to view themselves as a “largely civilian and peaceful society” (Masala, 2023, p 13).

The KSK fighting alongside the USA in Afghanistan appeared to significantly diverge from the typical German self-perception. The situation was particularly complex because it marked the first time since the Second World War that German soldiers were involved in high-intensity combat (Bleibohm, 2014; Schulze & Beucker, 2016). The Germans envisioned a very different involvement in Afghanistan. Discussing the situation in and around Kunduz, former Inspector General Harald Kujat encapsulated how most Germans would have preferred Bundeswehr’s engagement in Afghanistan: “[I]n contrast to the South, the conditions there were stable and the prospects for success good. A limited deployment, a calm region, no war – just reconstruction; that is something for the Bundeswehr” (Bleibohm, 2014, p 52).

The German public, especially critics of the SOF, viewed their scepticism towards the KSK as justified when media outlets reported on the case of Murat Kurnaz in 2006. Kurnaz, a Turkish citizen born in Germany, accused a KSK operator of mistreatment in an Afghan detention camp (Deutscher Bundestag, 2008). The Bundestag conducted

an investigation but found no evidence of abuse (Löwenstein, 2011). However, the media covered the case extensively over a span of two years, and again when Kurnaz published a book about the events, which became a bestseller (Buchreport, 2007). The prolonged media attention reinforced the belief among some segments of the German public that the KSK might be using its secrecy to conceal misconduct and abuse. The relationship between German society and the SOF further deteriorated due to the far-right incidents in 2017.

The media-based dialogue between GERSOF and the public is notably limited. Rare television airtime remains underutilized. For instance, when a former KSM commander appeared on a popular German talk show, the discussion did not address the civil-SOF relationship or KSM's contributions to national security; instead, the focus was on the rigorous training of the combat swimmers. The general lack of engagement in meaningful dialogue perpetuates the estrangement between the German public and one of its most complex national security instruments. The overall strained civil-military relations were a central reason why Angela Merkel's government was more invested in avoiding further public disapproval than reforming GERSOF in a manner that would allow them to fulfil their responsibilities more effectively, both within and outside NATO.

4 GERSOF AND THE POLITICAL DECISION-MAKERS

The German government generally seems reluctant to deploy the KSK and the KSM for missions beyond those endorsed by NATO, the European Union and the United Nations. In an interview with the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a member of the KSK noted, "We are world champions in training" (Hemicker, 2020). Following a visit to Calw, where the KSK is stationed, and conducting interviews with its personnel, a journalist from the weekly *Die Zeit* commented, "The German elite soldiers hardly ever fight" (Berbner, 2022; Schaaf, 2023). This observation was echoed by yet another media report stating that the "deployment load of the KSK ... has been low" (Flade & Pinkert, 2022). Concerns about potential backlash from the media and the public—coupled with criticism from the Bundestag—make the government hesitant to deploy SOF, especially fearing the repercussions of failed special operations.

Additionally, decision-makers seem to have low confidence in the military force. According to a KSK soldier, this is because "[t]he KSK lacks a Mogadishu"—a reference to the 1977 hijacking of the Lufthansa Boeing Landshut (Hemicker, 2020). During this incident, the German police SOF, *Grenzschutzgruppe 9* (GSG 9), rescued the hostages, thereby cementing their positive reputation among the German public and political elites (Hemicker, 2020). In contrast, the KSK remains the government's last resort option rather than a first-choice instrument for national security.

The KSM has encountered similar situations, for instance during a hostage crisis in 2009, when Somali pirates seized control of the German freighter *Hansa-Stavanger*.

On 5 April 2009, a Combat Swimmer Task Force assembled at their home base in Eckernförde and set out for Mombasa, Kenya. From there, they continued to the frigate Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. As one source reported on the rapid deployment:

Immediately after arrival at the airport of Mombasa, personal equipment was reduced to a minimum so that the [parachute] jump was feasible and an emergency access capability was immediately guaranteed; weapons, ammunition, radio, a few spare batteries, night vision equipment, ballistic protection. Five of the jumpers were snipers ... In the evening hours of April 7, 2009, we reached our DOP [drop-off point] ... A short time later, we were standing on the deck of the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which would become our home for the next five weeks (Weisswange, 2022).

From the time of the alert to the time of their arrival in the area of operation, it took the Combat Swimmers 54 hours and positioned them for an in-extremis operation. The German legal framework ensures the legality of military SOF operations to end hostage situations outside Germany's borders, particularly in conflict and war zones (Busch, 2020). However, rivalry between different ministries sparked a debate over whether the military or police SOF should resolve the hostage situation (Busch, 2020). Ultimately, the German government opted against deploying any SOF and chose to pay a ransom. Given the seeming underutilization of both the KSM and the KSK, and the perception of the KSK as a source of recurring problems, it would have been challenging for the government to justify an organizational scale-up for GERSOF rather than the KSK's down-regulation following the scandals.

The relationship between GERSOF and the parliament is similarly complex. The KSK and the KSM do not provide sufficient subject-matter expertise to the Bundestag. Instead, they face recurring challenges from both the left and right wings of parliament. In the wake of the KSK scandals, members of the Left Party parliamentary group called for the disbandment not only of the implicated 2nd KSK company, but also the entire KSK (Schweppe, 2020b; Lücking, 2021; Käppner & Szymanski, 2021). Another issue for GERSOF is the support from the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The AfD parliamentarians have criticized the manner in which the investigations into the KSK were conducted, particularly condemning the actions of the Military Counterintelligence Service, which they regarded as "an attack on [the] human dignity" of the KSK personnel (Deutscher Bundestag, 2021, p 1). Such support from the AfD might inadvertently reinforce public perception of the force as aligning with right-wing ideology, making it increasingly difficult for the government to strengthen and invest in GERSOF in the same way as other European states do with their SOF.

For German parliamentarians across the political spectrum, GERSOF offer a means to question and, in some cases, potentially discredit the government. In the past, Bundestag members have criticized the administration for making GERSOF a "force of the executive and not an integral part of a parliamentary army" (Rose, 2009, p 74).

More recently, the KSM's military assistance mission in Niger, known as Mission Gazelle, sparked a power-struggle debate. This mission took place in the context of the European Union's Training Mission in Mali, which had received Bundestag approval. Consequently, the government authorized Mission Gazelle without seeking explicit permission from parliament. The government justified its decision by defining the KSM's mission not as a deployment of armed forces where 'soldiers of the Bundeswehr are involved in armed operations or an involvement in an armed operation is to be expected' (Seyffarth, 2018, p 20). In essence, the government did not anticipate KSM to become involved in violent incidents. According to legal scholars, the government's approach was correct, and no Bundestag authorization for Gazelle was required (Busch, 2020). However, after the Ministry of Defence published details about the mission, some Bundestag members criticized the government in the German media (Busch, 2020). These parliamentarians pointed out the significant risk of terrorist attacks and ambushes faced by the KSM soldiers in Niger, referencing past incidents such as the Tongo Tongo ambush where U.S. Army Special Forces operators lost their lives (Hunt Friend, 2018). The parliamentarians argued that an armed confrontation could realistically be expected. Following a publicized debate, the German government officially submitted a request to the Bundestag to authorize the KSM mission retrospectively, which the Bundestag ultimately did (Gebauer & von Hammerstein, 2019; Carstens, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Forkert, 2020; RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland, 2020). Because GERSOF are closely associated with the risk of such mediatized power struggles between the government and the parliament, the former is more likely to avoid both explicit support and organizational upgrades of GERSOF.

Conclusion The KSK scandals made changes necessary, generating momentum for a structural reorganization of GERSOF. This paper has argued that the situation presented the German government with an important opportunity: organizational restructuring could have prevented redundant capabilities and competition among the KSM and the KSK, enhanced their interoperability, facilitated an efficient division of labour, and allowed them to pool resources. Thus, a comprehensive overhaul could have addressed pressing challenges and would have fostered the effective long-term stewardship of GERSOF, including their firmer integration into the military portfolio and the national security strategy. Additionally, it would have aligned GERSOF with other European countries and NATO's SOF initiatives, signalling Germany's commitment to collective defence. However, the media's, parliament's and public perception of the KSK specifically and GERSOF in general over the last roughly twenty-five years reverberated along the heterogenous, relational strands and shaped the German government's preference for moderate reforms. As instruments of national security, SOF "require careful attention and political calibration" (Mattelaer, 2016, p 3). Influenced by its key stakeholders, the German government has not demonstrated such nuanced management. GERSOF have been underutilized and chronically neglected.

According to special warfare lore, a SOF operator encircled by adversaries thinks, “Great, I have surrounded them from within!” Let us stay with such unconventional thinking for a moment. Last year, GERSOF had only one point of access to the Ministry of Defence, now it has three. As part of the sixty measures, they are now overseen by a Special Forces Advisory Board under the direction of the Inspector General, meaning that the highest echelon of the Bundeswehr, which previously may have seldom considered the KSK and KSM, may now do so routinely (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022). In other words, while the German government did not perceive the KSK scandals as an opportunity, GERSOF may view them as such, for better or worse.

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