Social Media, Gender and the Mediatisation of War: Exploring the German Armed Forces' Visual Representation of the Afghanistan Operation on Facebook

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Studies on the mediatisation of war point to attempts of governments to regulate the visual perspective of their involvements in armed conflict – the most notable example being the practice of 'embedded reporting' in Iraq and Afghanistan. This paper focuses on a different strategy of visual meaning-making, namely, the publication of images on social media by armed forces themselves. Specifically, we argue that the mediatisation of war literature could profit from an increased engagement with feminist research, both within Critical Security/Critical Military Studies and within Science and Technology Studies that highlight the close connection between masculinity, technology and control. The article examines the German military mission in Afghanistan as represented on the German armed forces' official Facebook page. Germany constitutes an interesting, and largely neglected, case for the growing literature on the mediatisation of war: its strong antimilitarist political culture makes the representation of war particularly delicate. The paper examines specific representational patterns of Germany's involvement in Afghanistan and discusses the implications which arise from what is placed inside the frame of visibility and what remains out of its view.

Keywords: social media, military, Facebook, mediatisation of war, Feminist Security Studies, Feminist Science and Technology Studies, Critical Military Studies, Germany, Afghanistan

Introduction[1]

This article examines the (gendered) visual representation of the military operation in Afghanistan on the German armed forces' official Facebook page. The paper is situated within a larger body of literature that examines the mediatisation of war.[2] At least for those not immediately caught up in it, and this certainly applies to the majority of people living in 'Western' societies, war is experienced only indirectly through its representation in different media. Thus, many people's understanding of specific conflicts, their causes, actual or potential consequences and justification (or lack thereof) is influenced by particular and unavoidably partial representations of war (Cottle 2006; Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010; Maltby 2012). Given the importance of public support for states' ability to (legitimately) wage war (e.g. Der Derian 2009; Carruthers 2011; Stahl 2010), one core focus of the literature on the mediatisation of war is how states seek 'to control the visualisation and representation of their own wars' (Kaempf 2013, 596).[3] Aside from trying to influence the media's representations for example through censorship, by constraining access to the battlefield or

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[2] In communication studies, mediatisation is often understood with a narrower focus on cultural and social change as a result communication increasingly taking place via different media (*inter alia* Hepp and Krotz 2014). For example, if people increasingly communicate not face to face but via digital social media, this will have an effect on society. As opposed to that, we use the term here more broadly to refer to the representation of war and violent conflict in different media, in line with the usage in the mediatisation of war literature.

[3] We focus here on states and their agencies but as the example of the Islamic State makes clear, this also applies to non-state actors (see Rid and Hecker 2009).

embedded journalism, states also produce their own representations of armed conflict and military operations. In this context, social media like Twitter, Facebook or YouTube are crucial (Seo and Ebrahim 2016).[4]

In this paper, we turn our attention to one particular facet that has only begun to receive attention, namely armed forces' activities on digital social media (Crilley 2016; Forte 2014; Jackson 2016; Maltby and Thornham 2016), which are a crucial site of legitimating the military and its activities, particularly so because they *de facto* 'collapse the gap between the military and the media', which makes them an interesting topic in its own regard (Crilley 2016, 51). Moreover, analysts of military recruiting have also pointed to the importance of paying attention to the production of media by states themselves (Rech 2014). We examine the German armed forces' – the *Bundeswehr*'s – visual representation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) on Facebook as one instance of this larger phenomenon. Specifically, we ask how the German ISAF mission is represented in photographic images and what impression of the operation this invokes.[5] This project is of both empirical and theoretical relevance. Firstly, Germany is a particularly interesting empirical case in regards to the legitimation of war, not only because it has received virtually no scholarly attention but also due to what is commonly referred to as its antimilitarist culture (see Nonhoff and Stengel 2014 for a critical discussion of the literature).[6] As opposed to the United States for example, which is said to have a 'deeply embedded' militarist culture (Harding and Kershner 2011, 81),

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[4] This not just includes traditional news media like magazines (the US *Stars and Stripes* and the German magazine *Y* being just two examples) but also popular culture, with some state agencies even producing their own comics (see Shim forthcoming).

[5] Given the limited space available and the general thematic focus of this special issue on visuality, we omit a detailed discussion of the relevance of visual media in general and photography in particular. This has, in any case, been provided elsewhere (see, in particular, Hansen 2011, 2015; Shim 2014).

[6] The only two contributions on the German armed forces' social media presence are a descriptive overview of these activities (Jacobs 2016) and an evaluation of its effectiveness in reaching the intended audience (Günther 2016).

after the Second World War military force was rejected as a legitimate instrument of German foreign policy. This provides an additional obstacle to the legitimation of military operations (Berger 1998; Maull 2000). Afghanistan stands out as Germany's most intensive military operation since the end of the Second World War. Secondly, with respect to theory we argue that the mediatisation of war literature could benefit from an increased engagement with feminist research in International Relations (IR) and Science and Technology Studies (STS) that draws our attention to the interface between technology and masculinity, here specifically in a military context (Carver 2008; Godfrey et al. 2012; Masters 2008).[7] The German case demonstrates the relevance of gender in the mediatisation of war. As we will argue in detail below, a large part of why certain representations, visual and otherwise, seem convincing and/or appealing because they can draw on established constructions of masculinity and femininity.

Gender constructions and the mediatisation of war

War presents an especially difficult policy to legitimize, not only because it is costly, both in economic terms and in lives lost, but also because soldiers are explicitly trained to kill, which outside of war is seen as highly immoral in virtually all societies and subject to severe criminal punishment. This makes military operations difficult to 'sell' to the public (Kaufmann 2004), and governments try to control how military operations are represented in different media. Research on the mediatisation of war examines how the representation, including visually, of war contributes to the latter's normalisation. Examples include Der Derian's (2009) analysis of the representation and production of war in and through (new) media technologies such as film and video games or Stahl's (2010) insightful account of the consumption and entertainment of war in US popular culture. According to these studies, the

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[7] We would like to thank Laura Shepherd for pointing us to this aspect.

mediatisation of war implicates a development after which war becomes virtuous (Der Derian 2009), that is a preferred, and ultimately normal, means of politics in international relations.

The literature on the mediatisation of war has provided valuable insights into how mediatisation contributes to the legitimation of war. Nevertheless, it could benefit from increased engagement with feminist research, in particular Feminist Security Studies, which, like the mediatisation of war literature, focuses on dynamics of militarisation. What feminism adds is a theoretical account of why certain representations make military operations seem legitimate. The argument, in a nutshell, is that certain representations draw on established gender constructions and corresponding behavioural norms, and this resonance makes them seem plausible. Because gender discourse cuts across, and intersects with, different thematic (say, security or human rights) discourses, gendered behavioural norms influence how people act in all kinds of social situations – independent of their sex. Gender discourse orders the world according to the masculine/feminine dichotomy, and because of the mutual infusion of gender discourse and (gendered) thematic discourses, certain attributes such as hard/soft, rational/irrational, strong/weak, active/passive, public/private or aggressor/victim become associated with a specific gender.[8] Masculinity and femininity are constructed as opposites, and the former is usually privileged over the latter (Hooper 2001, 43f). With respect to military violence specifically, feminist scholars have pointed to a number of ways in which masculinity and militarism/militarisation are linked (e.g. Cohn 1987; Enloe 2000, 2007; Godfrey et al. 2012; Goldstein 2001), and how gender constructions help legitimise the use of military force and delegitimise criticism and nonviolent alternatives (Shepherd 2006; Young 2003).

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[8] In reality, gender discourse is more complicated than the binary suggests, with different forms of masculinity and femininity, ordered in a hierarchical fashion (Connell 2005). We leave this discussion aside here due to limited space.

Particularly relevant in the context of this study is the nexus between technology, (various forms of) masculinity and notions of control that has been a core concern of feminist technoscience/feminist STS (for an overview, see Wajcman 2009) and, if to a lesser extent, Feminist Security Studies (Carver 2008; Cohn 1987; Masters 2008). As we will discuss in more detail below, the most notable feature of the photographs published on the Bundeswehr's Facebook page is the prominence of technical equipment, mostly vehicles of various sorts. What might seem unremarkable at first glance makes much sense if read in through a feminist lens. The interesting point here is that technology and science are not gender-neutral. Quite to the contrary, technology and machinery are closely associated with masculinity, which in turn is connected to control over nature (and women) (Mellström 2002; Wajcman 2009). As research in Feminist Security Studies shows, this argument also applies to military operations and the use of force in that a technical representation also invokes the notion of control over, in this case, the enemy, analogous to nature in technological discourse. For instance, Carver (2006, 2008) has pointed to the close association between machine metaphors and different forms of 'Western' masculinity ('warrior-protector' and 'rational-bureaucratic'). Machines, Carver points out, are associated with certain human qualities, including 'rationality, logic, economy, functionality, specialization, infallibility, consistency, value, reliability, interchangeability, and most importantly, freedom from emotion, personality and will' (Carver 2006, 464), all of which are closely associated with masculinity. Far from being neutral, then, a depiction of machinery is closely associated with masculinist notions of control. In a similar fashion, feminist scholars of militarism/militarisation have pointed to the importance of so-called 'cyborganization' (Godfrey et al. 2012, 556), that is, the technological enhancement of the military subject. In this context, in particular Masters's (2008) work on the increasing role of technology in the United States is highly relevant. Without going into too much detail, Masters points to the connection between the figure of the cyborg and a desire for dominance and control. She argues that after the Vietnam War,

casualties became increasingly unacceptable, and the response to that was the increasing reliance on technology to minimize, if only symbolically at the level of representation, the exposure of the vulnerable, and thus unreliable, human body to violence. Read this way, an increasing reliance on technology (body armour, drones, etc.) presents an attempt to make the soldier invincible (if only virtually) and ultimately to make death itself controllable.[9] If one pushes this thought further, one could argue that a visual representation of machinery and of the military-subject-as-cyborg creates the appearance of military violence, and ultimately the enemy, as something that can be subjected to rational control. Although Masters herself speaks more about the actual process of replacing humans with technology in the practice of warfare, we argue that also a visual representation of the soldier in a cyborganized way makes him appear less prone to breakdowns, emotional or physical, and more machine-like, invincible and in control. As a result, armed violence appears amenable to technical solutions. Thus, in a nutshell, the more technical and the less human a representation, the more it invokes an appearance of 'doability', of control.

Everything under (the warrior-protectors') control: the visual representation of ISAF

'This is not a war' – The peculiarity of the German case

In the context of the visual legitimation of war, Germany is a particularly interesting case, mainly due to what constructivist scholars have called the country's antimilitarist culture, which mainly manifests itself in a widespread rejection of military force in international politics (*inter alia* Berger 1998; Maull 2000). Since then, consecutive governments have

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[9] In the US context, Masters argues, the desire to control (the representation of) death stems from the experience of the Vietnam War which 'exposed the vulnerability of the human body' (Masters 2008, 93). In the German context, one could argue, it stems from the antimilitarist culture that emerged after 1945.

increasingly committed the Bundeswehr to multinational operations, culminating in ISAF as the Bundeswehr's most expensive and by far bloodiest mission to date. Despite an increasingly violent operation, German decision-makers were reluctant to divert from the initial framing of the operation as a humanitarian or stabilization mission. Despite an increasing combat orientation of the operation, this only changed after the 2009 Kunduz airstrike that, called in by a German colonel, killed up to 142 people, including a large number of civilians (Noetzel 2011).[10] Before 2009, German decision-makers had avoided using terms like 'war' with respect to anything the Bundeswehr was involved in, but the airstrike triggered an engagement with an 'operational reality' that soldiers had described as war for quite some time, and was followed by the adoption of counterinsurgency doctrine and a generally 'more offensive force posture' (Noetzel 2011, 398). However, decision-makers remained disinclined to fully adopt the war terminology. Thus, when Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (2009), in what can only be described as a very reluctant formulation, referred to the situation in Afghanistan as 'war-like' (*kriegsähnlich*), he was criticized in the Bundestag.

ISAF has since then been discontinued and replaced by the much scaled-down Operation Resolute Support, but the debate about the mission illustrates the continued relevance of antimilitarist discourse. Thus, if anything, the increased combat orientation of the German operation in Afghanistan has strengthened the scepticism of the general public towards combat operations (Zeit Online 2014). This, we argue, is important because discourse limits what can legitimately be said and done, including which form of visuality is acceptable. For instance, while studies of the US have pointed to the importance of a sublime aesthetics (e.g. Bleiker 2009, ch. 3), we would argue that in the German case this would clash with sedimented discursive practices of antimilitarism, whereas in US society it resonates with

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[10] The exact number of casualties is unclear.

discursive patterns that highlight the importance of military strength (Ferguson 2009) combined with a strong notion of exceptionalism. In that sense, we would expect quite a different form of visual legitimation of the military and its activities than in a US context.[11] Focusing on the Bundeswehr's Facebook presence allows us to trace how the German armed forces navigate the tension between an 'operational reality' that does at times involve violence and a society still highly sceptical of any form of military violence.

Visual data and coding

The empirical analysis is based on all photo albums on the ISAF operation included on the Bundeswehr's official Facebook page (http://www.facebook.com/Bundeswehr).[12] The page is maintained by the Bundeswehr's social media team, and photographs were provided by the Bundeswehr itself. Our corpus includes all albums made available until February 2015, which includes not just the mission but also the gradual withdrawal of troops and equipment and the conclusion of ISAF in December 2014. In February 2015, the Bundeswehr's Facebook page had 187 photo albums covering not just different operations but also manoeuvres and outreach events. 34 albums focus on the ISAF mission (plus one album with cover photographs). The albums included overall 411 photographic images. Each album is accompanied by a headline and, mostly, a one-paragraph caption of the album and/or its context. Equally, each individual photograph is explained by a caption. Since the captions under the images are provided in German, it can be assumed that the target group is a German or, more precisely, a German-speaking public.[13] On Facebook, viewers can express approval

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[11] Although one should keep in mind that to actually determine this one would have to do a cross-national comparison which is beyond the scope of this article.

[12] The Facebook page only became the Bundeswehr's official presence in 2013. From 2010 until 2013, the page had been maintained by a private Facebook user who had established the site because no site existed (Bundeswehr 2013).

[13] The Bundeswehr's increased presence on social media comes amid increased recruiting efforts of the Bundeswehr after the moratorium of conscription in 2011 and attempts to raise awareness for, and the

by liking images, albums or whole Facebook pages as well as leave comments. As of February 2015, the Bundeswehr's Facebook page had 323,616 likes. View counts are not provided.

In regards to our methodological approach, two aspects need to be explicated. Firstly, our analysis of the images themselves followed an open coding procedure, with analytical categories being built largely in a bottom-up fashion. The system of categories was continuously adapted during the coding process. One should however not mistake this for a purely inductive, *tabula rasa* approach. We consider the assumption that a researcher can approach the data without theoretical categories in mind problematic because the researching subject is always already embedded in specific discourses that inform how data is understood (Reichertz 2009). Rather, our coding process can be described as a back and forth between theory and research material in, if you will, an abductive fashion rather than being either inductive or deductive. As a result, our analytical categories were adapted during the analysis. For example, during our first round of very general, descriptive coding we noticed that a large number of images portrayed machinery in one way or another. To make sense of this empirical finding, we turned to, ultimately, feminist research that emphasizes the close connection between masculinity, technology and control. Thus, subsequent, more in-depth coding processes were informed by categories – in the sense of sensitizing concepts as it is understood in Grounded Theory (Bowen 2006) – derived from the theory. As a result, our attention shifted during the analysis towards a focus on cyborgian practices and how this affects the overall impression the images convey. Secondly, due to the relatively large number of images (with corresponding captions) in our corpus and the limited space available, the our

acceptance of, the armed forces' increasingly 'robust' international role in German society. According to the Bundeswehr, its YouTube and Flickr channels are intended to provide 'a "first-hand", extensive, realistic and above all transparent image of the daily routine and operational reality of our soldiers' (BMVg 2011) for German citizens. It is reasonable to assume that the Facebook page also serves mainly this purpose.

empirical discussion is illustrative rather than exhaustive and does not delve as much in depth as other visual methodologies, such as iconology.[14] Following Butler (2009), our empirical discussion is focused above all on the question of what is included in the frame and what is excluded and which impression of ISAF this invokes. As noted above, our discussion of what is shown is guided primarily by a focus on the cyborgian militarised subject and its connection to notions of control(ability). To be clear, this is by no means the only lens one could use, and neither is our discussion exhaustive. However, the main purpose is to illustrate the theoretical added value of a gender lens in regards to the mediatisation of war, so a general, rather illustrative, discussion might suffice in this context. Nevertheless, readers should keep in mind that a fully-fledged analysis of the photographs would ideally require a more thorough discussion than can be achieved within the narrow scope of this paper.

Inside the frame: cyborgian soldiers and machinery

The visual representation of ISAF on the Bundeswehr's Facebook page, we argue, presents an image of calm control, and a core aspect of this representation is the display of technology. To begin with, a large portion of the images simply show vehicles (trucks, armoured personnel carriers, and aircraft). For example, of the overall 411 images, 99 contain different armoured vehicles, 25 other vehicles.[15] 22 images show transport helicopters, 15 combat helicopters, and 20 feature transport aircraft. Many images also show quite mundane, routine processes like for instance the loading process of a howitzer onto or from a transport airplane. As noted above, technology itself is closely linked to masculinist notions of control over nature, and the display largely of machinery invokes the association that the Afghanistan conflict is something that is amenable to rational, technocratic solutions. Especially the display of relatively unexciting, mundane, routine tasks like the loading of a transport plane invoke the

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[14] Schlag and Heck (2012) for example analyse a single image.

[15] Note that some images show different types of vehicles at once, so the numbers cannot simply be added up.

impression of rational control.

This becomes even more clear if we connect the display of machinery to the representation of the militarised subject, which appears as a cyborg. Let us consider the example of one particular photographic image of German soldiers on patrol in Fayzabad.[16] The image shows a group of six soldiers wearing camouflage battle dress and peaked caps. They carry weapons (mostly assault rifles and one light machine gun) slung over their shoulders, and their posture suggests a routine situation. The soldiers walk towards the camera, followed by an armoured off-road vehicle. Further in the background, one can see other soldiers in what appears to be a military camp. Without being able to provide an in-depth analysis of the image, a few aspects are worth noting in regards to the production of an impression of calm control. Most importantly, the image of the German patrol displays the very cyborganization that feminist scholars have highlighted as relevant changes in the representation of war. Let us consider the example of sunglasses, which has been cited in the literature as an example for a 'cyborgian relationship' (Godfrey et al. 2012, 555, 556).[17] Sunglasses draw on the principle of visual dissymmetry and as such can help to establish barriers that separate an inside, the one who sees (from behind the shades), from an outside, the one who is seen. For sunglasses do not only repel sunlight and broken bits of glasses but protect their wearers from the intruding gaze of an external other. Good examples are perhaps the following brief episodes. In the online edition of the British periodical *Soldier Magazine*, the official monthly publication of the

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[16] Due to legal restrictions, this particular image could not be reproduced here, but it is available online: http://scontent.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/307511_220959664635300_200408177_n.jpg?oh=674464508b97536aad9aa66d2f68fb38&oe=59A4C13F

[17] The literature on the effect of sunglasses and their effect on the outside viewer is still limited. But Brown (2015) has recently examined their connection to notions of 'cool' in fashion. Coolness above all stands for a limited emotional involvement, again a typically masculine feature, commonly considered virtuous particularly in dangerous situations.

British Army, a reader in a December 2010 letter to the editors criticised a dress code imposed by his supervisors after which military personnel of his battle group in Afghanistan were not permitted, among others, to wear sunglasses while on patrol because they would prevent social interaction with local Afghan people. Other recent reports also indicate the importance of direct eye-to-eye contact to overcome distance and boundaries, establish trust and connection and enable social communication between people. For instance, police officers in Scotland and Vietnam have been banned from wearing sunglasses citing the intimidating effect of mirrored shades or the need to maintain appropriate manners while on duty in the public. The hindrance to establish – eye – contact concurs with the narrative of superior warfare: because sunglasses as cyborgian enhancements function like barriers and shields (either against sunlight, splinters or penetrating looks), depictions of sunglass soldiers make them appear not only remote and intimidating but also less vulnerable and vincible. Very much in line with Masters's (2008) argument that the reduction of the presence of the human body through increased cyborganization makes war seem more controllable, we would argue that also sunglasses make soldiers seem less prone to damage and, thus, more reliable.[18] Hiding the eyes of the soldiers, sunglasses also strengthen the impression of the (male) soldier as a rational, emotionally detached, 'cool' professional who is fully in control.

Other equipment can be read as fulfilling a similar function. Protective vests, weapons, helmets, even camouflage to hide the soldier from the enemy's view contribute to the impression of lethal effectiveness, toughness, reliability and formidability.[19] In the patrol image, the armoured personnel carrier is another useful example. It reinforces the overall

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[18] In this context, also the shape and colour of sunglasses is relevant, that is, their aesthetics matter. For depictions of troops or special forces with, say, sunglasses in retro shape with their oversized glasses or with pink-coloured frames are hardly imaginable and would not unfold their effects (e.g. to tell of a superior male warrior) like military-used sunglasses.

[19] This is further supported, somewhat paradoxically, by the casual wear of their guns and the absence of combat helmets, which reinforced the impression of coolness in the face of danger.

impression of the German soldier as in control, not least due to his technological enhancements. Equipment like armoured personnel carriers mainly serve to bring the unpredictabilities of war – improvised explosive devices, ambushes and the like – under the control of the warrior-protector. Rather than danger, they suggest security, almost invulnerability. The focus on the, in Masters's (2008, 94) words, 'hardware' (the equipment) instead of the 'wetware' that is the human soldier contributes to the image of calm control and at the same time also signals to domestic audiences that German soldiers are less prone to injury.[20] In the patrol image this impression is further reinforced by the largely impassionate but alert demeanour and facial expressions of the soldiers. They walk towards the camera, suggesting that they are not afraid of confrontation. Their relatively unemotional facial expressions convey both calm and concentration. Despite their heavy gear – the protective vests alone weigh at least ten kilograms –, the soldiers do not show any signs of exhaustion, walking with straight backs. They seem very much in control of the situation. This imagery ties in with established gendered discursive patterns of the soldier as the protector of the (less manly) citizen (Young 2003).

If one shifts the attention from the perspective of the sender (in this case, the Bundeswehr's social media team) to the receiver by looking at the number of likes as an indicator for popularity, what is remarkable, especially from a gender perspective, is the prominence of the figure of the sniper.[21] On average, photographs from our corpus received 132.7 likes. Among the 15 most-liked images, six images portray a sniper, three depict a helicopter in flight and one each shows soldiers during the public showing of a soccer

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[20] Whether the soldiers have all the equipment they need to be protected is a recurring issue of debate in the German Bundestag.

[21] Likes are a technical feature for Facebook to express an active, unambiguously positive association with specific online content like for instance photographs or status updates (Ringelhan et al. 2015, 6), and can even be used in research to accurately predict individual traits and attributes (Kosinski et al. 2013; Hong et al. 2017). Moreover, if someone likes online content, this is presented to the user's Facebook friends, which means that the effect multiplies (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013).

match,[22] a field hospital, a howitzer being fired, armoured personnel carriers in the snow, a soldier on guard duty and a howitzer being unloaded from a cargo plane, respectively. Figure 1 below shows a selection of the most-liked images as thumbnails, descending according to number of likes.[23]

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[22] Due to legal restrictions, this particular image could not be reproduced here. It is available online:
http://scontent.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t31.0-
8/10380500_750030298394898_6760355345572219535_o.jpg?oh=39dad380cdaefb363a2ca57b65c32c63
&oe=59A10604

[23] It should be noted that landscapes are also a prominent motif among the ISAF photographs, which also reinforce the impression of calm. Since our main focus here is on the connection between masculinity, technology and control, we leave this discussion aside (on landscape photography, see Marien 2002).

Figure 1. Most-liked images (over 400 likes)

Photo credits: Bundeswehr/N.N., Bundeswehr/Wayman, Bundeswehr/Elbern, Bundeswehr/RC North PAO

Since a detailed discussion of all the images is beyond the scope of this article, let us pick out the figure of the sniper as an example for the relevance of masculinity and technology. The relative prominence of snipers is, per se, not surprising given the popularity of the figure in visual culture. Snipers cast prominently in movies and video games grossing high profits in commercial sales.[24] As the popularity of the sniper figure resonates well beyond national or cultural boundaries, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of a visual economy (and not a visual culture) of sniper representations (Poole 1997). The figure of the sniper is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, snipers are considered as a particularly elite type of soldier, in popular culture (Woodward and Jenkins 2012) as well as among military and police personnel (Kraska 1996), drawing again on gendered constructions. Being almost the archetype of the calm, detached professional, the sniper never misses his (and not her) target. The figure itself is closely related to the visual: snipers' craftsmanship requires them to observe and monitor their targets without being seen. Wearing camouflage suits to remain invisible and evade the watchful eyes of their enemies, they can take their time to spot, identify and kill their targets, often from great distances. Quite often operating behind enemy lines, snipers are specially trained and supplied with equipment other troops would not catch sight of. Because their activities require special skills, snipers often combine particular

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[24] Some examples for movies prominently featuring the figure of the sniper are *American Sniper* (2014), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *Jack Reacher* (2012), *The American* (2010), *Vantage Point* (2008), *Shooter* (2007), *Smokin' Aces* (2006), *Jarhead* (2005), *Tears of Sun* (2003), *D.C. Sniper: 23 Days of Fear* (2003), *Phone Booth* (2002), *Sniper 2* (2002), *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), *Spy Game* (2001), *The Jackal* (1997), *Assassins* (1996), *Leon – The Professional* (1994), *Sniper* (1993), *Quigley Down Under* (1990), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Two Minute Warning* (1976), and *The Deadly Tower* (1975). Video games include Sniper: *Ghost Warrior III* (2017), *Sniper Elite IV* (2017), *Sniper Elite III* (2014), *Sniper: Ghost Warrior II* (2013), *Sniper Elite V2* (2012), *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* (2010), *Sniper: Art of Victory* (2008), *Sniper Elite* (2005), *Worldwar II Sniper: Call to Victory* (2004), *Line of Sight* (2003) and countless other so called First-person shooter games that include the possibility to slip into the role of snipers with perhaps the most prominent examples being the Call of Duty, Battlefield and Rainbow Six series.

markers that are associated with elite, heroic and superior forces. This construction of the sniper as a superior, that is, particularly manly, soldier, is reinforced through some of the commentaries by viewers. For instance, one image that shows a sniper firing (the second right image in the bottom row in figure 1) is accompanied by a heated discussion about which weapon can be seen in the photograph, with one user reprimanding others for their lack of knowledge, claiming that '[o]ur snipers would tear off your heads' if they could hear that inaccurate 'drivel'.[25]

At the same time, snipers almost always kill from a safe distance and remain hidden from view, much more so from enemy bullets – a fact that however does not undermine their aura of heroism. But not only do snipers enjoy a positive image thanks to their superior skills at killing the enemy; snipers have another crucial characteristic that distinguishes them from other soldiers, namely precision. Not only do they precisely hit their target but, quite similar to a neurosurgeon removing a brain tumour, snipers hit *nothing but* their individual target. Snipers do not cause 'collateral damage'. Thus, in a way, they are the ground troop equivalent of so called precision-guided munitions ('smart bombs'). Similar to the logic concerning the increasing use of precision-guided munitions in military operation (see Zehfuss 2010), representations of snipers are part of a narrative of clean, ethical and superior warfare. The practice of making photographic close-ups of snipers, who are mostly shown in full battle dress and ready for combat, decontextualizes them from their surroundings so that the gaze of the viewer is solely focused on their aura of military professionalism.

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[25] The comment is available here:
http://www.facebook.com/Bundeswehr/photos/a.124539210944013.19483.122840837780517/1541536546
49235/?type=3&theater

Outside the frame: what remains hidden from view

In conjunction with the absence of certain elements and practices from the photographs, the rational-technocratic image of the mission is reinforced. We discuss three aspects in particular: the enemy, emotions, and destruction. This absence contributes the image of the war in Afghanistan as non-threatening, as essentially under control.

The enemy

The first thing that is striking about the pictures is the complete absence of the enemy. While we see some Afghan civilians (in friendly conversation with German soldiers) or soldiers of allied nations, the enemy is entirely absent. Even those images that show troops in contact only portray 'our' soldiers, while the Taliban are left outside the frame. There is of course a rational explanation for that. It might for instance be due to the fact that the pictures have been taken by a Bundeswehr photographer, who for obvious reasons will not likely be embedded with the Taliban. Similarly, the reason might be that a great portion of the fighting takes place over relatively great distances, which makes it more difficult to capture both war parties, much less so in a single frame. But the important element here is not the reason for the absence but what this absence does. For if we look at the construction of meaning through visual imagery, what matters most is not what a photographer (or author) intended but how an image works in the context in which it is published. So how does the absence of the enemy influence the interpretation of the war an audience might get? Arguably, the striking absence of the enemy in the pictures further contributes to taking the war out of the war, if you will. For it is the presence of the enemy that makes all the difference between target practice at the firing range and combat. Indeed, almost all the pictures from actual military operations could as well be photographs from training sessions or manoeuvres. Looking at the pictures, what fails to materialize is a sense of the mortal danger that the soldiers in fact are in, and this further increases the impact of the aesthetics of war insofar as is also makes the whole endeavour seem a lot less dangerous and ugly than it actually is in real life.

Emotions

What is furthermore striking is the almost complete absence of any kind of emotions such as anger, joy or worry; facial expressions in the pictures are limited to detached professionalism. Emotions in general are under-represented in the pictures, but what is particularly remarkable for the representation of an endeavour that involves killing is the absence of fear, grief and (emotional) exhaustion. Even the (few) images of actual enemy contact usually show soldiers behind cover engaging the enemy (which himself remains hidden from view, see below). As mentioned above, these images could equally portray military exercises; the only clue that what one is seeing is not a manoeuvre is the absence of blank-firing adaptors on the barrels of the soldiers' rifles. This stands in stark contrast to the portrayal of war in photojournalism, which focuses on the (negative) physical (older photojournalism) or emotional (recent photojournalism) effects of armed conflict on soldiers and civilians (e.g. Chouliaraki 2013; Liu 2015). The imagery presented by the Bundeswehr analysed here is marked by a striking absence of both physical and emotional effects of conflict.

While it seems evident that militaries cannot be expected to show (shocking) images of death and injury of their own soldiers – although coffins of fallen members of the Bundeswehr are shown (indicating that the question is also *how* human loss is visualized) – it is important to point out the effects of this way of seeing and showing. Withstanding the risk of death and existential fear, the soldiers are professionals and in control of the situation. This arguably builds on long established constructions of masculinity as rational and in control (as opposed to emotional femininity). These pictures of professional soldiers who 'keep their cool' even under fire present a warrior aesthetics strikingly similar to popular war movies like *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Lone Survivor* (2013) or *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016).

This image of the professional, detached soldier is further reinforced by the technical language of the captions that describe combat situations with neutral military slang as 'troops in contact', as if the combatants were not shooting at each other but having a civilized conversation. Of course, in military jargon it is clear what troops in contact means. And while a civilian audience will most likely understand what is meant, the technical language nevertheless hides that what we see is humans trying to kill each other, not merely some trained professionals doing just another job like surgeons, plumbers and journalists (on the effects of 'neutral' language, see Thomas 2011). Consider for a moment that the pictures were not showing soldiers but any other group of people shooting at other people, say, members of a gang. Such a picture would most likely disturb viewers (as it should). Even if we were just to see other professionals trained to handle weapons, namely law enforcement officers, it is likely that a picture of a fire fight with automatic weapons would leave us wondering what might be going on that triggers such an extreme display of violence. For what is going on in these pictures is indeed very much out of the ordinary (especially for Germany as a stereotype 'civilian power'), and presenting it in the technical language of professionalism works to silence that fact.

Death, destruction and suffering

Previous studies of aesthetics and war have also highlighted sublime representations of fallen combatants, which is entirely lacking in the Bundeswehr images. This is not to say that there are no pictures of fallen soldiers. However, these are limited to detached, formal military rituals, in which soldiers in uniform carry a casket onto a plane. We do see death in caskets, but these pictures show resolve, not grief, devastation or destruction. We do not see (human) soldiers mourning their fallen friends. What we see is military personnel carrying an anonymous coffin into an airplane. While these pictures contribute to German soldiers as in principle 'grievable' (Butler 2009), the grief itself is not being shown.

Furthermore, while actually people die in Afghanistan and material objects are destroyed on a daily basis as a result also of German decisions – as the 2009 Kunduz airstrike demonstrated –, we see no trace of that in the pictures. Moreover, while German soldiers are 'grievable', and thus worth living, Afghans are entirely absent. Not only are the Taliban absent but also are fallen ANA members. The civilian population only features as extras that German soldiers can talk to on patrol. This absence makes war even more acceptable (Zehfuss 2009), as dead Afghans remain hidden from view and thus present no obstacle to 'our' waging war 'over there'.

Neither are there close-up pictures of soldiers in, or shortly after battle. To no avail will one search for any battlefield portraits as the, if you will, 'classical' images of journalistic war photography that reveal war's suffering not simply through twisted dead bodies and destroyed homes, but through a portrait of the soldier after battle (see Danchev 2011). There are no pictures of battle fatigue or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The reason cannot possibly be that there are no such scenes, for the number of German soldiers suffering from PTSD (in particular returnees from Afghanistan) continues to rise (Biesold 2009, 46). Neither do we see injuries of any kind, much less so lasting ones. Indeed, what can be seen, and this is strikingly similar to military training at home, are images of rescue *exercises* of injured soldiers, as if the mission was itself only a drill. The photographs feature only those who have recovered, thus reinforcing the image of an almost invincible soldier. For instance, three of the pictures viewed more than average times are those of a major general returning to his post after an injury that he 'fully recovered' from. What we do not learn about are the hundreds of soldiers who do not return or who do not recover.

In that sense, what is lacking in these pictures from 'war-like situations' (in Guttenberg's [2009] words), is war, and this omission crucially reinforces the aesthetic image of war that the photographs create. For while photographs of the suffering of war provoke an ethical response from their viewers (Danchev, 2011: 117), these pictures do not. Overall, the

portrayal of the German – and mostly male – soldier as an unemotional, rational professional resonates with established gendered constructions of the soldier as a 'warrior-protector', which, as a number of feminist studies have pointed out, helps justify military operations and the need for armed forces in general (e.g. Carver 2008; Young 2003). These hierarchical gendered constructions juxtapose an 'alpha-male' hegemonic masculinity (represented by the soldier) with various more vulnerable subordinated masculinities and femininities, with the latter being in need of protection provided by the former (Carver 2008, 79).

With respect to war photography, many researchers have focused on the portrayal of violence and the question of whether images of human suffering invite or distract from a critical engagement by obscuring human suffering through a specific aesthetic (Carrabine 2011; Debrix 2006). Others have asked how images can contribute to securitization (Hansen 2011; Möller 2007; Schlag and Heck 2013). In contrast, we argue that what makes the depiction of war compatible with German antimilitarism is a way of seeing that does not at all include human suffering. As a consequence, the war in Afghanistan becomes visually normalized in the sense that what could be called the core business of war – killing and destruction – is hidden by visually appealing imagery. To be clear, we do not contend that the Bundeswehr intentionally downplays the amount of suffering in war – we simply do not know that. Rather, we argue that no matter what the aims of the Bundeswehr are, the pictures nevertheless work in a particular way and create a particular representation of war as something aesthetic, appealing and non-threatening or at the very least not fundamentally dangerous or about killing. In this vein, the Bundeswehr's photographic depiction of the Afghanistan deployment very much works as a – in Welsch's terms – 'sugar-coating of the real with aesthetic flair' (1996: 2).

Conclusion

In this study, we have examined the visual representation of the ISAF operation on the *Bundeswehr*'s official Facebook page. In doing so, we make a contribution to IR scholarship on security and visuality which has so far paid little attention to the military use of social media in general and to the German visual politics of war in particular. In our analysis, we have focused in particular on two aspects. Firstly, building on insights from gender and feminist security studies, we have argued that the display of machinery and the representation of cyborganized soldiers as cool, calm and strong professionals contributes to the impression of the war in Afghanistan as manageable and under control. Secondly, also the visual absence of suffering, emotions and the enemy reinforces this view of the conflict as something that can be brought under control by rational means. After the withdrawal of ISAF, this stands in contrast to representations of the conflict in Afghanistan that highlight rising casualty numbers, increasingly negative assessments of the situation by terrorism experts (Hoffman 2015) and of what is seen as an entirely unclear future for Afghanistan (Murtazashvili 2016). What is highly remarkable particularly against the background of a once widely uncontested antimilitarist culture is the militarized masculinity portrayed in the ISAF images. Arguably, these pictures are what could be called a counterhegemonic intervention – based on a militarized masculinity – against the dominant antimilitarist discourse. For what we can see here is, in a way, a 'return of the (male) German warrior' (if in a cyborgian version), one who is not ashamed to display the tools of (mostly) his craft.[26]

More generally, as far as the study of German foreign and security policy is concerned, this article points to the importance of both, visuality and gender. It shows how visual imagery can contribute to a specific and (unavoidably) partial representation of reality

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[26] The phrase of the returning warrior is borrowed from Managhan's (2012) article about the Canadian security state.

that can help (de)legitimize certain policies, in this case, out-of-area operations. However, Facebook is only one, if important, site for the visual struggles for the authoritative reading of German military operations (and government policy more generally). Thus, it would be worthwhile exploring to what extent visual representations on other media like Instagram, Tumblr, YouTube or Twitter resemble, or differ from, the one on Facebook. Moreover, while a cross-national comparison is well beyond the scope of this article, such an analysis would help establish national idiosyncrasies as much as common patterns, for instance in NATO countries. Similarly, the analysis demonstrates the importance of gender constructions in the legitimation of military operations, as many of the visual representations draw on established discursive practices from gender discourse for legitimacy. Aside from a few exceptions (Engelkamp and Offermann 2012; Schoenes 2011), this aspect has been neglected altogether in the study of German foreign and security policy. Given the centrality of gender(ed) constructions for the legitimation of violence in international politics, highlighted by feminist security studies, scholars of German foreign and security policy need to pay much more attention to this aspect.

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